

# *Dune*: An Uncommonly Ambitious Sci-fi Epic

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On Oct. 22, Denis Villeneuve's long-awaited sci-fi film *Dune* was released in theaters and on HBO Max. With an ensemble cast including Timothée Chalamet, Zendaya, Oscar Isaac, Rebecca Ferguson, Stellan Skarsgård and Javier Bardem, *Dune* follows the struggles of the noble house Atreides in the year 10191. Led by Duke Leto Atreides, his concubine Jessica, and son Paul, house Atreides are given stewardship of the desert planet Arrakis, the source of a valuable drug known as spice. Set up for failure by the emperor himself, the Atreides must contend with the machinations of their bitter rivals house Harkonnen, the designs of the mysterious Bene Gesserit sisterhood, and Paul's destiny to become a psychic super-being, the kwisatz haderach.

Since the original *Dune* novel was released in 1965, over the years many directors and writers have tried their hand at adapting it to the silver screen. Cult director Alejandro Jodorowsky's attempt in the mid-1970s catastrophically collapsed before it had even entered production. And David Lynch's 1984 adaptation was a massive critical and commercial flop, crippled by executive meddling and Lynch's frustration with the project. It seemed as if *Dune* was too impossibly strange and unwieldy to be corralled into the confines of a Hollywood blockbuster. Any time a director tried, the source material eluded their grasp, like desert sand spilling out from a desperately clenched fist.

Taking all this into account, it is nothing short of a miracle that Denis Villeneuve's *Dune* is as cohesive and comprehensible as it is while still preserving the dense worldbuilding and surreal strangeness that makes *Dune* so unique. It is an almost impossibly delicate balancing act, deftly navigated by a sharp script that shows and tells in nearly equal measure. The careful balance between the alien and the familiar also extends to the human characters. They are immersed in a world staggeringly different from our own, but there are many examples of vulnerable, wonderfully human displays of emotion throughout the film. The effectiveness of these emotional moments owes as much to the script as it does to the acting.

*Dune* is an exceedingly well cast film. There

are no weak links, only actors I wish had more screentime. Timothée Chalamet plays Paul Atreides as a thoughtful, sensitive character, almost underselling his performance. His normally soft-spoken and brooding performance makes his intermittent intense displays of emotion all the more impactful. Oscar Isaac is completely captivating as Duke Leto Atreides, carrying himself with the stubborn, ethereal nobility of a figure from legends of kings and queens of old.

Similar to Chalamet, Stellan Skarsgård's performance as Baron Harkonnen is subdued, his voice barely rising above a gravelly murmur. But with the Baron, it is a different kind of quiet, denoting his cunning and cruelty. What few words he does speak are as calculated as they are dripping with contempt. Rebecca Ferguson displays terrific range as Lady Jessica, one of the most challengingly multi-faceted characters in the film. Ferguson is completely believable as a member of the enigmatic, seeming supernatural Bene Gesserit sisterhood, as a devoted companion to duke Leto and a loving mother to Paul. Even characters with scant few moments of screentime, like Zendaya's Chani and Stephen McKinley Henderson's Thufir Hawat leave a lasting impression.

The soundtrack by Hans Zimmer is easily his most daring and original work yet. The soundscape Zimmer creates is impressively diverse, with guttural hammering percussion, stirring strings, gentle synths and exotic wind instruments all working together in delicate harmony. The heavy usage of female vocalists, their voices distorted into ethereal chants or spine-tingling wails, gives *Dune*'s score an imposing, spiritual quality. In an IMAX theater with speakers that rumble your seats, the majesty and mystery of Zimmer's score is visceral and overwhelming.

*Dune* is a startlingly unique film that earnestly manages to adapt seemingly impossibly complex source material into a thought-provoking and engrossing 2.6 hour cinema experience. With stunning effects, a star-studded cast and an ambitious and complex story, *Dune* feels truly deserving of being called an epic.

*Dune* was released on streaming platforms on Dec. 3 and returned to IMAX theaters for a limited time on Dec. 3.