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## Travolta's critical battlefield



A hairy moment: John Travolta plays Terl

**By BBC News Online Entertainment Correspondent Tom Brook**

John Travolta has played evil characters before, but nothing quite matches the monstrous villain he portrays in his latest film, *Battlefield Earth*, a sci-fi epic opening in American cinemas this weekend.

Travolta portrays an extraterrestrial called Terl, a seven foot mean spirited "Psychlo" who is stationed on Earth in the year 3000.

Terl is sadistic and enjoys punishing the "man-animals" who eke out an existence under strict Psychlo control.

Travolta relishes playing such a repugnant character.

"Like a lot of other Hollywood actors, Cagney and Humphrey Bogart, as they got older they became famous for being villains," he explains.

"Terl is the definitive evil character, he is pompous, he is rude, he is mean-spirited."

Battlefield Earth chronicles the efforts of humans,



Travolta is enthusiastic about the film, despite a barrage of criticism

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under the leadership of the heroic Jonnie Goodboy Tyler - played by Barry Pepper - to defeat the Psychlos' domination of Earth.

That means bringing Travolta's Terl under control, since he is the Psychlos' Chief of Security.

As the Psychlos wage war against their human enemies a special effects extravaganza lights up the screen as the extraterrestrials dart around in menacing spaceships wreaking destruction.



Barry Pepper as Jonnie Goodboy

Travolta not only stars in this film, he also co-produced it and is proud of what he has achieved. He calls it "an epic, massive, science fiction movie".

"George Lucas saw it the other night, he loved it, he said it was great and that was the icing on the cake," he told reporters.

The film has provoked some controversy because it is based on the novel *Battlefield Earth*, a best-seller written by the Church of Scientology founder L Ron Hubbard.

Critics say the film is a vehicle to promote the church's teachings.

Herbert Rosedale, president of the American Family Foundation, a cult awareness group, says: "You cannot, if you are a Scientologist, utilise L Ron Hubbard's words without it being part of your religious dogma."

"Therefore, it is a reiteration of religious dogma, and in that sense it is propaganda".

But Travolta, a co-producer of the picture and long-time disciple of Scientology, has said there is no connection between *Battlefield Earth* and Scientology.

The actor has wanted to bring Hubbard's story to the screen since he first read the novel in the 1980s.

He dismisses the charge of propaganda by pointing out that the book has already been an enormous worldwide success.

The Church of Scientology will not comment on the film other than to say it has had nothing to do with the picture.

But the presence of this \$70m Hollywood epic based on the writings of their founder could help the much-criticised church's image.

Toby Miller, a media professor at New York University says: "Battlefield Earth will help to mainstream what Scientology looks like.

"It will say Scientology is also about narrative, it's about story, it's about pleasure, it can be the basis of a Hollywood action-adventure film, that it is not in fact some weird cultish phenomenon that is all about taking away children and stretching their minds into places they shouldn't go."

*Battlefield Earth* is expected to do well in its first weekend of business, but most of the reviews have been pretty dire.

Entertainment Weekly described Travolta's sci-fi venture as "a big budget folly" which makes viewers feel sorry for its star, while Friday's *New York Times* said it "may well turn out to be the worst film of the century".



Travolta co-produced the film



Forest Whitaker plays Ker in the film

This lack of enthusiasm from critics may be a blow to Travolta's prestige, but it probably won't hurt the actor in the long run.

He still remains an extremely popular performer, and he has three other films in the pipeline.

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