

# THE FIFTH ELEMENT

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Plus Years  
Later,  
*The Fifth  
Element*  
is Still  
One  
Hell of  
a Sci-Fi  
Spectacle

by Samantha Mason

**DIRECTOR** Luc Besson  
**STARRING** Bruce Willis, Milla Jovovich, Chris Tucker, Gary Oldman  
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When director Luc Besson set *The Fifth Element* upon the world in 1997, it was the most expensive European film ever made, at \$90 million. Bruce Willis (who plays one of the leads in the movie, Korben Dallas) took a pay cut to appear in the film, instead opting for a percentage of the movie's profits. Twenty-plus years later, with the movie taking in a global box office haul of over \$263

million, his decision should leave Mr. Willis with few regrets. *The Fifth Element* is a movie that has stood the test of time and has entered the annals of sci-fi movie history.

While after more than twenty years, *The Fifth Element* is a cult classic, the film met mixed reviews on release and to this day, seems to be a film one either loves or hates. It opened at

number one at the box office but still had people leaving in the middle of it. Even now, it's considered one of the best and one of the worst sci-fi movies ever made, depending on who one asks. Besson had to work hard for it to see the light of day. To secure financial backing, since he only had five features to his name at the time, Besson had to put *The Fifth Element* aside and prove himself a reasonable risk, which he did with the release of *Leon: The Professional*. Even after making the movie, Besson lamented that if he had waited a bit longer, he could have taken advantage of the newer special

Images:  
(Main, Upper  
Right, Middle  
Right, Lower  
Right) Leeloo  
played by  
Milla Javovich,  
(Lower Left)  
Korben Dallas  
played by Bruce  
Willis

...the film  
has serious  
production and  
cinematographic  
prowess...



Thierry Arbogast), having been nominated for numerous awards in these areas.

The plot of *The Fifth Element* is straight forward: its classic good versus evil, set in the 23rd-century. However, it takes this simple concept and weaves it into a ripping good yarn, complete with some loose threads and gaping holes that simply don't matter once one is engaged in the lavish visual feast that is the movie. Based on an idea that a teenaged comic-fan Luc Besson came up with, the film is everything that one might expect of a hormone-laden teenaged boy's fantasy. It has aliens good and evil, spaceships, more guns than you can keep count of, chases, and fight scenes as choreographed as any Asian martial arts flick. The film is full of stereotype ladies: the near-identical curvy ladies at the fast food place and serving aboard the cruise liner, and the constant nagging mother of Korben. Apart from the female lead, Leeloo (played perfectly by Milla Jovovich,) there are no strong females in the entire movie. By today's standards, the film would even be termed sexist and possibly offensive. However, it's not fair to judge the movie by current expectations on gender representation, and in one character, the film was ahead of its time for acceptance. Radio personality Ruby Rhod (played to delightful excess by Chris Tucker, after Prince turned down the role as "too effeminate") dresses outlandishly and struts about like a peacock in clothing that would be almost too much on most



women, but on a man, it's up there with the best of the glam rockers of the '70s. Despite, or because of his appearance and innuendo, Ruby is a sex symbol to the ladies. The interplay between Willis' Korben and Tucker's Ruby provides some of the best comic moments in the movie.

While on the subject of costumes, one of the eras foremost fashion designers designed not just the gender-bending garb of Ruby Rhod, but over 1000 futuristic costumes for the movie. Jean Paul Gaultier, a fan of Besson's earlier films, reportedly personally inspected, and adjusted as needed, every costume worn by the five

hundred extras in one scene. His avant-garde design helps make the 23rd-century of the film vibrant and distinct. From the minimalist outfits worn by Leeloo (at one point she is outfitted in what is meant to be a series of bandage strips, strategically placed to please the censors, and nothing else), to the functional yet still minimal garb of taxi-driver Korben, the armor of the alien Mangalore warriors, the more ornately elaborate couture of the patrons attending the operatic concert of the Diva Plavalaguna, and even the robe worn by the Diva herself (played by Besson's wife at the time, Milla Jovovich), every costume worn by the five



**Images: (Above Left) Korben Dallas and Mangalore Warriors, (Left) Gary Oldman as Jean-Baptiste Emmanuel Zorg, (Above Right) the Diva Plavalaguna played by Milla Jovovich, (Right) Chris Tucker as Ruby Rhod**

dropped out at the last minute), Gaultier stamps his mark on the scenes, while still allowing the film's exuberant nature to shine through. The sets, designed by French comic book artists Jean Girard and Jean-Claude Mézières who had so inspired the young Besson, range from utilitarian (Korben's tiny apartment), archeological (the ancient temple central to the titular Fifth Element), a trash-filled spaceport, and to the lavishness of the cruise liner Fhloston Paradise. The way that Gaultier's costumes work so well with the various sets is pure artistry.

Speaking of artistry, the Diva Plavalaguna's aria was written to contain parts unsingable by the human voice, to foster an alien sound. Composer Eric Serra "purposely wrote unsingable things, some too low, some too high, sentences that were too fast," into his composition. The actual voice of the Diva is Albanian opera singer Inva Mula. While Serra expected only about 60% of the song to be singable, Mula managed to perform 85% of it. The remaining, technically impossible, bits were made possible via sampling. The result is nothing short of amazing, and well worth watching the movie for all by itself. Besides this aria, the rest of Serra's score perfectly complements the movie's nature, encompassing orchestral elements, along with reggae, and even hula music.

Clearly, I am in the camp that believes *The Fifth Element* is pure fun. Jovovich and Willis deliver strong performances, even if one thinks that the roles themselves



don't require a lot of depth; they are believable as the characters they portray. Gary Oldman, as the evil corporate head Jean-Baptiste Emmanuel Zorg, just oozes sociopath amped to comical excess. Tucker, as the most outrageous character, serves to tie everything together with a zany bow. Even after twenty-plus years, it's hard to come up with another movie, since its 1997 release, that is as much unashamed, quixotic, sci-fi action fun as *The Fifth Element*. It's a film that doesn't take itself seriously and doesn't expect the audience to either. What it's here for is to entertain and delight the eyes and ears with an over-the-top spectacle. <sup>TF</sup>

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