

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 19 July 2005 18:00

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CHARLIE & THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY

For the life of me, I can't figure out what director Tim Burton was trying to accomplish with *Charlie & the Chocolate Factory* that wasn't previously accomplished by Roald Dahl's book or the beloved 1971 film.

It's not a terrible movie by any means. There are some astonishing visual gags – I might never forget the scene of the nut-shucking squirrels taking their vengeance on Veruca Salt – and the art direction is often extraordinary; God knows there are always things worth looking at, sometimes just on the edges of the screen. Some of Burton's directorial decisions, too, are more than ticklish, such as his casting of the actor Deep Roy as *all* of the Oompa-Loompas, and his presentation of their poetic moralizing – taken from Dahl's original work – in a variety of upbeat musical styles with accompanying, comically appropriate choreography. Technically, *Charlie & the Chocolate Factory* is impressive. There's just one problem: It isn't any fun.

When news of this new *Charlie & the Chocolate Factory* first broke last year, most everyone I knew was appalled, and it was clear that Burton's work was, as a *de facto* remake, going to face some tough scrutiny. Unlike our feelings about the original versions of *War of the Worlds*, *The Longest Yard*

Burton's "Chocolate Factory" Less Treat Than Toothache: "Charlie & the Chocolate Factory" and "Howl's

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, or
House of Wax
, a lot of us had an instant "How
dare
they?" reaction to the idea of someone messing with
Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory
, even if – or, for some,
especially
if – Tim Burton was at the helm. (It's important to remember that, for 34 years now, that movie is
many children's introduction to the notion that a family movie can be not only really funny, but
really
scary
) The party line continued to be that Burton's version was going to be "more faithful to the spirit
of Dahl" – which I think is Hollywood-ese for "rated PG" – and having seen the film, that might
be true. But I feel compelled to ask: Why does this movie look
exactly
like
Willy Wonka
, albeit with a bigger budget?

Since they're both based on the same book, this shouldn't be much of a surprise; how many
different ways *are* there to show the gleaming-white lab where Mike Teavee gets zapped? But
lots of individual *shots* seem lifted from *Willy Wonka* here, along with long
passages of dialogue, so the effect is like watching the original after a major CGI overhaul, as if
George Lucas himself came in to digitize the movie and drain it of its humor. What, exactly, is
Burton trying to prove here? That he's a better director than
Mel Stuart
? Like Gus Van Sant's shot-for-shot version of
Psycho
, Burton's film often has the feel of a stunt, but it feels like a rather mean one that caters to a
cynical, high-tech-happy audience; the wondrous visuals and cavernous sets seem to suggest,
"This is what the original
should
have looked like."

Perhaps, but it sure wasn't supposed to *sound* like this. Beginning with his decision to cast
Freddie Highmore as Charlie and David Kelly as Grandpa Joe – two marvelously naturalistic
actors – Burton appears determined to scrape off much of
Willy Wonka
's sentimentality, which he has ably done. He has also gone too far in this direction. Now you're
not connected with the characters
at all

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. Again, it can be argued that this is truer to "the spirit of Dahl," but if we're not affected by Charlie's good-hearted acceptance of his lot in life, or don't feel like cheering when the bratty kids meet their fates, what's the point? When the monstrous tykes get what's coming to them, the reactions of the others range from mild concern to downright detachment; no one seems much bothered by things that should be making an audience, at least, giggle and shiver simultaneously. (Both the 1971 film

and

Dahl's book are more emotionally involving than Burton's endeavor.)

Charlie & the Chocolate Factory

suffers from a distressing lack of personality. The brats and their parents are so underplayed as to not be onscreen at all, and except for the magnetic Kelly, you aren't much amused by the actors who make up the Bucket household; Noah Taylor and Helena Bonham-Carter, with ridiculous fake teeth, play Charlie's parents, and aren't even given one good joke apiece.

And how is Johnny Depp? Predictably weird, yet – unpredictably – not weird enough. Like Burton, Depp does funny little things all throughout; Wonka's tossing away of Mr. Salt's business card is priceless, and his jubilant, childlike exclamation of "'Kay?" – as if seeking approval he knows he doesn't need – becomes more appealing every time you hear it. But he's nowhere near as funny as you hope he'll be – the lines he's saying in his head are, I'm guessing, infinitely more entertaining than the ones the script gives him – and for most of his role he shares the others' implacable deadpan; not only do you not know what the character is really thinking, but you don't much

care

. It's an unusual performance but not one that adds much to the movie; Gene Wilder's Wonka was far more sinister, and more amusing.

Perhaps it's unfair to spend so much time comparing Burton's opus to its 1971 forebear, but this work is such a blatant retread that it all but *invites* unfavorable comparison, and there isn't a single scene here that's more enjoyable than its counterpart in

Willy Wonka

. Not one. (Anyone who hasn't seen the original will probably have a fantastic time, but exactly how many people does that leave us with?) The film will probably make a bundle – the way

all
of this summer's uninspired remakes are making a bundle – but you have to wonder how many of its viewers are really going to

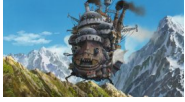
enjoy

it; for a story that celebrates the imagination, this

Charlie & the Chocolate Factory

, visual enchantments and all, displays very little of it.

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HOWL'S MOVING CASTLE

By contrast, Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki's animated works are *overflowing* with imagination. His latest,

Howl's Moving Castle

(now playing at the Brew & View), features many of those signature Miyazaki touches that can take your breath away; the interior of the city-sized, titular castle is so imperiously complex that you want to stare into it for hours, and wait 'til you see the character of Turnip-Head, a brilliant, and extremely literal-minded, re-thinking of

The Wizard of Oz

's Scarecrow. Miyazaki's movie is dazzlingly detailed and has a rich storyline, and it should be seen. I just wish the characters were more beguiling (it's telling that that scarecrow, the movie's most enjoyable figure, never

speaks

), especially when we're stuck with Billy Crystal as the movie's Kvetching Jewish Sidekick. (In a Miyakazi touch, he plays a

fire

.) Seriously, can't this tired stereotype be given a rest, especially in regards to Crystal, whose familiar vocal inflections haven't been funny for ages? You'd think you'd be safe from them in a Hayao Miyazaki movie. You'd think wrong.