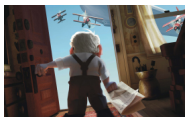


Mobile Home: "Up" and "Drag Me to Hell"

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 02 June 2009 12:34

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Directed and co-written by Pete Docter, Pixar's *Up* -- the studio's 10th full-length animated feature -- is so funny, touching, and inventive that I felt like a bit of an ingrate, if not a complete jerk, for wishing it were just a little bit better.

Don't get me wrong: The movie is a great time, and during certain scenes, especially the opening reel's wordless love-story montage, *Up* is even legitimately Great. The many wondrous moments, however, are *so* wondrous that they have the unintended effect of making the film's occasionally rote sequences feel more generic than they otherwise might have; segments that, in another movie, would probably be considered miraculous appear somewhat under-imagined (or *oddly* imagined) here. This is hardly a debilitating flaw -- the movie is never less than hugely enjoyable -- but your expectations are set so ridiculously high from the start that it's almost disappointing when Pixar's latest turns out to be imperfect.

For a lengthy stretch, though, perfection seems entirely within *Up*'s grasp. The film concerns the squat, 78-year-old crank Carl Fredricksen (voiced, with peerless grouchiness, by Ed Asner), who, with the aid of a few thousand helium-filled balloons, floats his urban dwelling to a ravishing waterfall in South America -- a trek long planned for (albeit through a more conventional mode of transportation) by Carl and his late wife, Ellie. Yet before the septuagenarian embarks on his journey, accidentally bringing an excitable, pre-teen scout named Russell (Jordan Nagai) along for the ride, *Up*

presents us with an abbreviated account of Carl's and Ellie's life together: their initial meeting as

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children in the 1930s; their shared obsession with aviator and adventurer Charles Muntz; their marriage; their renovation of a ramshackle, two-story house; and, finally, Ellie's passing, with Carl left whiling away his days in a large, empty home. With its alternately playful and plaintive ragtime-infused score by Michael Giacchino, this prelude is a spectacularly graceful model of narrative economy, and it's so achingly sweet and romantic and sad that you can't imagine the rest of the movie living up to it.

Unsurprisingly, it doesn't, but *Up*'s opener is so moving and humane that it didn't seem out-of-line to hope we'd be treated to something more ... I dunno ...

nuanced

than the breathless slapstick we're subsequently given. It would be churlish to reveal too many of the movie's comic gambits -- they include the appearances of a squawking female bird named Kevin and dozens of wild, and unexpectedly talkative, canines -- and Docter's and co-screenwriter Bob Peterson's storyline conceit is a pretty outstanding one, with Carl's South American experiences mirroring the types of cliffhanger serials he and Ellie adored as kids. Yet for all of its Indiana Jones-like appeal and its frequently hysterical throwaway bits (the alpha dog's malfunctioning collar had me crying with laughter), the second half of

Up

is rather by-the-numbers.

Carl is an animated figure of such individuality and complexity that you don't really *want* to see him turn into a jokey action hero, scaling the side of a Zeppelin and whatnot; it's fun, but it's fun at the expense of character, and the movie also leaves you with a few too many niggling logistical questions that routinely pull you out of the narrative. (When and how did the aviator also become a genius inventor? And why, when Christopher Plummer voices him later in the film, does he look a good decade younger than Carl, who must be his junior by at least 15 years?) The film is about a house that travels across continents via balloons, so no one's expecting

realism

here, but the credibility still gets strained -- scene for scene, it's just a little less believable than the

Toy Story

movies or

WALL•E

Flaws and all, though, *Up* is still an exceptional entertainment, fast-paced and imaginative and gloriously well animated. (Some friends and I saw the film in its 2D, rather than 3D, presentation, and didn't feel the least bit gypped.) And like the best Pixar offerings, it features moments of deep emotionalism so pure you feel you might never forget them. In one of

Up

's finest, Russell tells Carl about a ritual he used to enjoy with his estranged father, in which they would sit on a curb and eat ice-cream cones, with Dad counting the red cars that passed and his son counting the blue ones. "It might sound boring," says Russell, "but I think it's the 'boring' stuff I remember the most." Me too, kid.



DRAG ME TO HELL

I didn't find Sam Raimi's horror goof *Drag Me to Hell* to be particularly scary, but it's been a long, long time since I've seen a movie -- and one rated PG-13, no less -- that so effectively worked your gag reflex. In the film, Alison Lohman plays a young loan officer who falls under the curse of a hideous gypsy, and the poor girl is forever finding horrible things forced into, or emerging from, her mouth: bile, blood, puke, embalming fluid, maggots, a fist, a *kitten*

, and even, in a nod to Raimi's low-rent classic *Evil Dead II*

, an eyeball. (Other facial cavities get violated as well; in one impressively nauseating shot, a fly crawls into Lohman's left nostril and exits out her *right*

nostril.) It's gross, to be sure, but enjoyably, happily gross; Raimi seems to be having such a deliriously good time making the audience go "*E-e-e-e-w-w-w!*

" that the fact that you only rarely go "*A-a-a-a-a-a!*

" barely matters.
Drag Me to Hell

is stuck with some rather clunky plotting and exposition, and the performances -- even with a cast that includes Justin Long, David Paymer, and Adriana Barraza -- rarely rise above the tolerable. But it's a swift, engagingly retro comic shocker with some terrifically nasty sequences (watching the lead defend herself with a boxful of office supplies is a particular hoot), and Lohman has some absolutely first-rate moments. Given her usually vacant expressions and little-girl voice, I've never been a big fan of the actress, yet I almost changed my tune after seeing her tiptoe through a house with a butcher knife while murmuring a sing-songy "*Here*

kitty kitty" It turns out she's a surprisingly nimble and witty comedienne; it just took Raimi

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drowning her in goo to make me
realize
it.