

Off to See the Lizard: "Rango," "The Adjustment Bureau," and "Beastly"

Written by Mike Schulz

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RANGO

I spent the past several days enjoying a vacation halfway across the country, and am consequently getting my reviews written a few days later than usual. In terms of reviewing the animated *Rango*, though, I'm quite grateful for the delay, because I so rarely get the chance to write about movies that I love after I've seen them a second time. Had the vacation lasted longer, I might've even gone for a third.

Since *Rango* is (a) yet another animated release (b) by a studio other than Pixar that (c) boasted a mostly irritating trailer showcasing all manner of (d) wisecracking animals, I'll admit that my hopes weren't terribly high from the outset. But it didn't take more than the opening image and sounds of the film's avian mariachi band (and *de facto* Greek chorus) to get me grinning at director Gore Verbinski's Western-flavored comic adventure. And by the time the closing credits rolled some 100 minutes later, I was less impressed than utterly flabbergasted by what a smart, hilarious, inventive, and visually and thematically rich entertainment

R

ango
actually is.

Our titular protagonist is a Hawaiian-shirt-wearing chameleon (voiced by Johnny Depp) who, in

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the film's opening minutes, is accidentally ejected from his safe yet lonely terrarium confines and thrown into the blistering heat of the Mojave desert. Through the aid of a tenacious, Mexican-accented armadillo (Alfred Molina) and a feisty, shotgun-toting fellow lizard named Beans (Isla Fisher), he arrives in Dirt, a dusty ghost town with a suspicious populace and a severe shortage of water. Self-trained in the art of improvisation, the fumbling, mild-mannered Rango convinces the animal, reptile, and amphibian townsfolk that he is, in reality, a dangerous gunslinger from out West ("the *fa-a-ar* West"), and as he spins his tall tales of violent escapades and that time he killed a septet of brothers with only one bullet

And that's all the plot you're going to get from me, because one of the many joys of *Rango* – on a *fi*
rst

viewing, at any rate – lies in how imaginatively screenwriter John Logan blends storylines, character types, and narrative conceits from so many genre classics, everything from Western mainstays such as

High Noon

and

A Fistful of Dollars

to Roman Polanski's underworld thriller

Chinatown

. (In one especially, if bizarrely, gratifying action sequence, an

Apocalypse Now

tribute segues directly into a nod to Kubrick's

2001: A Space Odyssey

.) In basic form,

Rango

is an archetypal good-versus-evil oater, from the play of light and shadow in the ramshackle saloon to the wide-eyed little girl (mouse) with braids who plaintively asks our hero, "Yer gonna git the water back, ain't ya?" Yet Logan – the

Gladiator

screenwriter whose credits aren't exactly filled with lighthearted works – has such a good time playing around with his sources of inspiration that even if you think you know where events are leading, you're routinely, delightfully confounded. (It's not long before that sweet little urchin whips out her own pair of six-shooters.)

As for the rest of *Rango*'s joys, they should easily prove ticklish no matter *how* many times you see the movie. His

Pirates of the Caribbean

s and the underrated slapstick

MouseHunt

have proved that Verbinski's action-comedy staging can be wizardly, and unencumbered by three-dimensional settings and people, the director tops his previous highs with several set

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pieces here; Rango's two tussles with a hungry hawk and the canyon-diving bat attack are only the most memorable of the film's gloriously anarchic feats of choreography. The spectacular, occasionally horrific detail employed for the denizens of Dirt – nearly all of whom are missing an eye, an ear, a tail, or some other body part – allows you to enjoy the fascinating beauty of the characters' ugliness. And the vocal performances could hardly be bettered. Though unseen, Depp comes through with his sweetest and most unexpectedly poignant portrayal in years, but the film also boasts wonderfully eccentric, committed turns by Fisher, Molina, Bill Nighy, Stephen Root, Ned Beatty (nearly as much of a bastard here as he was as

Toy Story 3

's hateful teddy bear Lotso), Abigail Breslin, Ray Winstone, Harry Dean Stanton, and, in a genius-level bit, Timothy Olyphant. The actor's channeling of Clint Eastwood is so uncanny that

I left my first

Rango

viewing convinced that I heard the genuine article.

Meanwhile, and for all the outstanding visual gags on display in the movie, it's taken considerable effort to get through this review without spoiling the best verbal jokes – especially the one involving the word "mammogram" that I can't *believe* the filmmakers got away with. (The movie's PG rating, I should mention, is most definitely earned, what with the violence and the frequent blurts of "hell" and "damn" and the surprise cameo by Hunter S. Thompson.) Just know that there are dozens of throwaway lines here that Woody Allen himself would've been proud to pen – many of them, such as Rango's "I'm actually one of the few males with a maiden name," sound just like lines you've heard Woody Allen characters

say –

and that you really haven't laughed until you've listened to the film's appendage-deprived misfits one-upping one another around a campfire. ("One time, I coughed up a whole dalmatian." "I found a human spinal cord in my fecal matter once.")

Rango

is a thrill to watch, but the movie may be an even bigger pleasure to listen to; it's the fall-down-funniest animated feature I've seen since 2009's

Fantastic Mr. Fox –

maybe even 2007's

The Simpsons Movie –

and friends should be warned that I'll probably be quoting from it for weeks

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