

## Disney on Ice: "Frozen," "Black Nativity," and "Homefront"

Written by Mike Schulz

Monday, 02 December 2013 09:57

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### **FROZEN**

As its fans (and I'm one of them) will gladly attest, Disney's *Frozen* is a bit of a throwback to the studio's recent golden age of animated entertainments – that period from the late '80s to the mid-'90s that found more-or-less traditional fairy and folk tales goosed with healthy portions of Broadway razzmatazz. (Those in the press championing this new work as a welcome and rather bold return to form, however, do seem to have conveniently forgotten about 2009's excellent *The Princess & the Frog* and 2010's near-excellent *Tangled*.)

But while much of the film follows the standard Disney-in-its-prime formula to the letter – big-eyed ingénue heroine, check; wacky animal sidekick, check; rafter-shaking power ballad destined to win an Oscar, check – there is one aspect to

*Frozen*

that separates it from the

*Little Mermaid*

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*Beauty & the Beast*

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*Lion King*

herd: The movie is kind of bonkers.

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Not always to its credit, in my opinion, as it took close to 10 minutes at the film's start for me to glean just what the hell was going on. Inspired, as the end credits tell us, by Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Snow Queen* – though, beyond its wintry setting, inspired *how* is tough to discern

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### *Frozen*

opens with some fuzzy, confusing backstory introducing us to our young leads: the red-headed spitfire Anna (voiced by Kristen Bell) and her platinum-blond sister Elsa (Idina Menzel), the latter of whom was born with the magical power to turn anything she touches into ice. A frightening household accident, an encounter with some lovable trolls, and the deaths of two parents later, the formerly close siblings are now uncomfortably estranged, and awaiting Elsa's coronation as the new queen of a remote Scandinavian kingdom. But in her overly dramatic reaction to the news of Anna's engagement – a betrothal that, as characters here recognize, comes about

### *awfully*

quickly, even for an animated comedy – Elsa's incensed touch imposes an eternal winter over her entire kingdom, causing the young royal to hightail it to the hills and begin her self-imposed exile in a shimmering ice mansion resembling Superman's (the Christopher Reeve Superman's) Fortress of Solitude. It's up to Anna, then, to bring Elsa back home, aided by the hunky, Nordic galoot Kristoff (Jonathan Groff), his trusty reindeer Sven, and the ambulatory snowman Olaf (Josh Gad), whose grandest hope involves lying on a beach in summer.

Let's stop for a second here. Magical powers? Okay. Why not? Lovable trolls? Well, sure, there are trolls in Andersen's story, but they're not exactly lovable, and barring their singing the one self-consciously clever, time-wasting song that should have been cut from the movie entirely, it's hard to see what *Frozen's* trolls bring to the party here. Ambulatory snowman? You got me. We see the very young Elsa construct a snowman that she names Olaf early in the film, yet we never learn what kind of sorcery causes it, numerous years later, to spring to life, or why Olaf is so fanatically devoted to the idea of one day sunning himself in the tropics. Much of Disney's latest, directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, is like this; random ideas that don't connect appear to be thrown into the mix with little regard for narrative logic, and the movie too frequently leads us to expect plot diversions and confrontations that don't transpire. (Early on, it's suggested that close to 10 years pass with the sisters not allowed to see one another, and we wait for the moment when they'll finally, again, lock eyes. Apparently, it happens, but perversely it happens off-screen.)

Yet considering how fantastically funny Josh Gad's line readings are, I wouldn't have traded that strange, sun-obsessed snowman for anything in the world, just as I wouldn't have dreamed of missing Menzel's belting of Elsa's requisite you-go-girl anthem "Let It Go," or the film's stunningly tactile animated effects, or the description of Groff's cheerful lummock as "riding across the fjord like a valiant, pungent reindeer king." Even when it doesn't make a lick of sense, the touching, smartly paced, oftentimes riotous, and consistently gorgeous *Frozen* inspir

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es a delicate enchantment, and I'll admit to being quite taken with the one element of the movie that truly

*did*

feel revolutionary: It turns out that the token, storybook example of true love required to break Elsa's spell is not, in fact, love of a romantic nature. Thematic progress in Disney's animated outings may be slow in coming, but as the studio's post-golden-era product happily suggests, it is coming.



### **BLACK NATIVITY**

Based on a 1961 "gospel song-play" by Langston Hughes, and with the playwright name-dropped at seemingly every possible opportunity – even to the point of the man's poetry being read on-screen and the movie's lead character being named Langston – writer/director Kasi Lemons' holiday musical *Black Nativity* is a terribly self-conscious piece of work. Thankfully, and despite the film's overly sentimental plotting, that's about the last place here where a derivation of the word "terrible" would be deemed appropriate. True, this tale of a 15-year-old (Jacob Latimore) who learns about the true meaning of Christmas after moving into the Harlem home of his grandparents (Forest Whitaker and Angela Bassett) is treacly in all the expected ways, and a few unexpected ones, too; I, for one, never thought I'd see a film in which that somber bad-ass Tyrese Gibson rapped and got all misty-eyed at the possibility of reconnecting with his estranged son. But the naked, wholehearted sincerity of *Black Nativity*

's sort is something that can't be easily brushed off. The staging may be awkward and the acting may be all over the map (Whitaker is as understated and elegant as Bassett is forced and cloying), yet there's an emotional hunger and a beautiful enthusiasm on display throughout Lemmons' work, and the music is frequently sensational. Personally, I wish that Jennifer Hudson, who plays Langston's struggling single mom, would stop overselling her every number as if still auditioning for

*Dreamgirls*

, but she sounds spectacular when she relaxes into her songs, and there are plenty of sterling contributions by the likes of Latimore, Grace Gibson, Luke James, Mary J. Blige, and others.

(Even Whitaker and Bassett – the latter of whom lip-synched her Tina Turner in

*What's Love Got to Do with It* –

get to show off their vocal ability, and do so admirably.) It's a mess of a movie, but

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### *Black Nativity*

is nothing if not filled with genuine Christmas spirit. May this iffy yet unequivocally soulful entertainment – a box-office underachiever over Thanksgiving weekend – continue to play through the next three weeks, when crowds might be more in the mood to see it.



### **HOMEFRONT**

Have you seen the poster for director Gary Fleder's *Homefront*? The one with Jason Statham, in a baseball cap, looking all protective over a little girl, and the emblem of the American flag superimposed over his denim jacket, and the tag line "How far would you go to protect your home?" Given the images and rhetoric, did we even

*need*

the poster-bottom reveal reading "written by Sylvester Stallone"? I got such a charge out of the film's hyper-patriotic, hyper-masculine advertising –

*God! Country! Statham!*

– that the movie itself was almost invariably going to disappoint, and it did; Fleder's outing isn't anywhere near the Holy Grail of laughable bad movies I hoped it might be. It sometimes is, particularly whenever characters speak Stallone's thuddingly obvious prose without the necessary suggested wink, and whenever Winona Ryder – despite her herculean efforts – tries to be convincing as a meth-addicted slut. (I will probably always adore the performer, but that eternal little-girl voice is starting to seriously hinder her believability in grown-up roles.) Yet this Louisiana-set revenge thriller, damn it, has just enough going for it to hold your interest and keep you from wanting to hurl perishables at the screen. Statham, who gets to smile a lot more than usual, builds some lovely rapport with Rachelle Lefevre and Omar Benson Miller and, as his young daughter, the confident Izabela Vidovic, and it should go without saying that the man still gives good smack-down. (Better than good, if you feel the way many do about James Franco.) Kate Bosworth, frighteningly thin here, comes through with a risky and surprisingly effective turn as a fellow meth-head. And Fleder keeps the mostly ludicrous action moving along so swiftly that we don't have much time to formulate perfectly reasonable questions such as "Why is there apparently only one cop in this town?" and "Why is the heroic lead in this Americana saga played by a British guy?" These and other puzzlers can be asked during a second viewing of

*Homefront*

. They won't be asked by me, but the movie is just not-bad enough that I'm guessing *someone*

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will want to watch it more than once.

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