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FINDING NEMO

Fish, by nature, aren't the most expressive of species, but try telling that to the loopy geniuses at Pixar. In the studio's latest computer-animated adventure, *Finding Nemo*, director Andrew Stanton, his wizardly animators, and the vocal talent contribute such breathtaking life and range of emotion to sea dwellers that you leave the movie dizzy with happiness.

After the *Toy Story* films, *A Bug's Life*, and *Monsters, Inc.* , it should come as no shock that the movie is marvelous. Yet it's *always* a shock, because you can't quite believe that this level of quality is sustainable. This is the Pixar team's fifth full-length feature, and their works are at their best (
Toy Story 2
) miraculous, and at their "worst" (
Monsters, Inc.
) terrific.
Finding Nemo
is dangerously close to miraculous. What are they putting in the water over at Pixar? How do they
do
it?

Finding Nemo's storyline is simplicity itself: In the middle of the ocean, Marlin, a worrywart clownfish (voiced by Albert Brooks), loses his only spawn to a deep-sea diver with a net; during the course of the film, Marlin, with the aid of a dotty bluefish (Ellen DeGeneres), attempts to get junior back, and the young un, now secured in a dentist's aquarium, tries to figure out how to get home. From such basic setups does mad inspiration come. Movies these days are so devoid of surprise that I wouldn't dream of revealing the film's numerous twists, except to say that, yet again, the Pixar team proves itself to be probably the smartest and cleverest group of individuals working in Hollywood today. Certainly, they're magicians in the field of computer-animation, but even their scripts are wonderful, and there's no denying their gift for casting. (In addition to Brooks and DeGeneres, listen for *Nemo*'s Willem Dafoe, Geoffrey Rush, Allison Janney, John Ratzenberger, Austin Pendleton, Barry "Dame Edna" Humphries, Vicki Lewis, and Stephen Root.) There's nothing, it seems, in which this group doesn't excel. It would be enough for

Finding Nemo
to be brilliantly animated. (The film's color palette is extraordinary.) It would be enough for the plotting to continually surprise and subvert expectation. It would be enough for the movie to be laugh-out-loud funny, and even, in one of Ms. DeGeneres' more inspired scenes, tears-rolling-down-your-cheeks funny. But we get it all in one glorious package; with the possible exception of
A Mighty Wind
, it's more sheer fun than anything I've seen in well over a year.

THE ITALIAN JOB

There's something about the professionalism on display in *The Italian Job* that drives me a little batty. The film, a remake of a 1969 comedy-thriller with Michael Caine, is a crime caper in which a group of good-looking young thieves – and a token elder – pull off the perfect heist, have their loot stolen from them in return, and attempt to get the goods back during an elaborately staged traffic jam. All sorts of careful planning, safecracking, and computer hacking ensue. F. Gary Gray's staging is smooth and craftsmanlike; the final heist is particularly well-choreographed. The film is sharply edited, technically impressive, and rarely dull. And it's all so generic as to border on the inhuman.

Now I have nothing against a sleek, efficient piece of summer-blockbuster nonsense; last year,
The Bourne Identity
and
The Sum of All Fears
delivered considerable enjoyment without, for even one moment, taxing your brain. Yet these movies at least featured
traces
of humanity. There was never any doubt, in either film, that you were in a make-believe universe, but the performers,
Bourne
's Franka Potente and
Fears
' Morgan Freeman especially, convinced you that something was actually at stake. The actors in

The Italian Job
– Mark Wahlberg, Charlize Theron, Edward Norton, Seth Green, Mos Def, Jason Statham, Donald Sutherland – have all learned their lines and appear competent, but there's not a one of them who resembles an actual human being. All of them rattle off their confectionary dialogue with a blitheness that would require depth to be considered lightweight; they wear their "colorful" attitudes like articles of clothing that can be dropped at any moment.

I always get a little annoyed when people tell me that the performances "don't matter" in entertainments like this, because without them, what do you have? Why be witness to innumerable car chases and crashes if the results of said events don't *matter* to anyone? Watching *The Italian Job*, with Wahlberg's macho posturing and Green's faux joviality and Norton's I'm-too-good-for-this-claptrap indifference, you couldn't care less about how the story unfolds; chases and crashes are all you have. For many, that'll be just fine, and I won't be surprised if the movie becomes a hit. But even if you're enjoying the high-tech action of *The Italian Job*, you might still find yourself longing for a little *human* contact.

LOST IN LA MANCHA

For those who've wondered what director Terry Gilliam has been up to since 1998's *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas*, the answer can be found in the tragicomic documentary *Lost in La Mancha*, currently playing at the Quad Cities Brew & View. Mr. Gilliam, it seems, has been spending the past several years, and quite a few before that, working on the latest screen version of Cervantes' Don Quixote saga, and Keith Fulton's and Louis Pepe's film details the project's pre-production and subsequent shooting – all six days of it. *Lost in La Mancha*

is an account of how promising material, adapted by a visionary director, can be completely undone by bad planning and even worse luck, and as the film proceeds, Gilliam's ebullience slowly gives way to sheer panic. Any resemblance between Don Quixote and Gilliam himself is, on the filmmakers' part, completely intentional.

With its behind-the-scenes view of an epic going afoul, *Lost in La Mancha* contains fascinating elements; as an engaging work of cinema, however, it's a bit lacking. A lot happens in the course of the movie's 90 minutes, but almost none of it affects us, even as comedy. Fulton and Pepe haven't found a way to engage us emotionally with Gilliam, so his travails, and the eventual dissolution of his pet project, carry no weight;
La Mancha
is merely a record of the production's troubled history, as dry and matter-of-fact as a behind-the-scenes mini-doc for HBO. The movie just sits there.

The filmmakers are canny enough to punctuate early scenes with animation of the sort Gilliam provided for Monty Python – they add some sorely needed comic texture – and once Johnny Depp shows up, playing Gilliam's Sancho Panza, your interest in the goings-on increases; from the abandoned footage we see, Depp was all set to deliver one of his wack-job specialty numbers. Yet *Lost in La Mancha* amounts to little more than an exercise in schadenfreude, providing scattershot giggles at Gilliam and company's follies. Gilliam's
Quixote
was attempted, a leading actor fell ill, the rains came, the money vanished.
And
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