

Written by Mike Schulz

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## **THE STATION AGENT**

After spending 90 minutes with the cast of Tom McCarthy's *The Station Agent*, I believe I would, à la *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, have eagerly leapt right into the screen and been content to spend the rest of my life in their company.

McCarthy's film, which recently earned Screen Actors Guild Award nominations for Peter Dinklage, Patricia Clarkson, and the film's ensemble, is a true original – a happy movie about loneliness and depression – and, within its indie-comedy parameters, probably the most utterly enjoyable movie in local release. (It's currently playing – where else? – at Rock Island's Brew & View.) But the film's charms aren't easily explained; when I began describing the movie to a friend who hadn't heard of it – "Well, it's about a dwarf who inherits an abandoned train depot ..." – I knew I'd lost him immediately. And yet, its inability to be categorized is the key to *The Station Agent*

's magic. Not much happens in the film; three lonely souls – Fin (Peter Dinklage), a quietly morose little person obsessed with trains; Olivia (Patricia Clarkson), an eccentric divorcée whose child recently passed away; and Joe (Bobby Cannavale), a talkative Cuban who sells *café con leche* out of a truck – meet, form a tentative friendship, and eventually become a kind of family.

## "The Station Agent" Ranks with 2003's Best Movies: Also, "Big Fish" and "House of Sand and Fog"

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There's little plot to speak of, yet McCarthy proves himself a wizard at moods. His dialogue throughout is effortlessly funny and touching, yet his silences are exquisite; watching Fin walk along the railroad tracks, with Joe following about five feet behind him, and Olivia following five feet behind

*him*

, you get a better sense of the characters' delicate relationship than any speech could ever provide. McCarthy is confident enough in his characters, and the actors who portray them, to let them just

*be*

; viewing the film is like spending an afternoon fishing with your best friend, not saying a word, relaxing in the comfortable silence. It's bliss.

Peter Dinklage does some of the finest slow burns I've ever seen. His role is almost purely reactive – Fin, constantly expecting everyone around him to say or do something stupid, looks at the world with benumbed exasperation – and the drama, and comedy, of the movie come in watching Fin's defenses gradually melt away; Dinklage is a subtle but emotionally charged actor, a true leading man, and when Fin begins to open up and reveal himself, the effect is devastating. The same is true for Patricia Clarkson, who brings to the film lovely, understated currents of grief, longing, and barely concealed anger; in the past half-dozen years, it's become clear that there might be no role this staggeringly talented actress couldn't play. And Bobby Cannavale is exactly the firecracker the film needs to avoid any hint of self-pity; Joe is such a loveable, clueless dufus – a more realistic version of Matt LeBlanc's Joey Tribbiani – that Fin and Olivia gaze at him with astonishment and joy, as does the audience. Memorable characters make for memorable movies, and thanks to this trio of talents, and the wit and skill of writer/director Tom McCarthy, *The Station Agent* ranks as one of 2003's absolute finest achievements. See it with friends; it's a movie you'll want to chat about for days.



**BIG FISH**

Tim Burton on an off day is still more interesting to watch than most directors on a good day, so I didn't necessarily dislike *Big Fish*; the film displays a fair degree of imagination and some inventive slapstick. Still, like the director's *Edward*

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## *Scissorhands*

, it's a wan and treacly thing, sentimental goo buoyed by first-rate visuals. The movie is essentially a series of tall tales, narrated by a drawling Albert Finney as Edward Bloom, that involve Bloom's peculiar, often unbelievable exploits as a youth struggling to find his place in the world, and the film's framing device sucks much of the fun out of them; Bloom, voicing many of these whoppers to his son (Billy Crudup), is a dying man, so his stories aren't just fantastic, they're meant to be

## *poignant*

. The heart of Burton's movie, based on the Daniel Wallace novel, is in this reconciliation act; father and son haven't spoken in years, and we're asked to believe that Bloom's outlandish tales, which are what originally drove the son away, are now, in the father's final moments, what inexorably bonds them – it's like

## *Tuesdays with Morrie*

re-made with circus freaks.

Almost none of the film's emotional moments work, not just because of the cloying nature of the presentation, but because most of the major characters seem miscast; you don't feel a connection to, or between, any of them. Finney and Ewan McGregor, who plays the younger Bloom, are just fine individually, but at no point do you believe that McGregor's hopeless romantic could morph into Finney's jowly Big Daddy, and Billy Crudup looks lost, as if he were still waiting for someone to explain his role to him. A few supporting characters – Helena Bonham Carter as a southern eccentric, Danny DeVito as a barking ringleader – fare better, and Jessica Lange and Alison Lohman are uncannily well-matched as elder and younger versions of Bloom's wife. But, in the end, the only reason to see the film is for the visuals; there's a breathtaking sequence in which time literally stops when McGregor first gazes at Lohman, and although I generally loathe circus sequences – they allow directors too many opportunities to be both sweet *and* perverse, which is a queasy combination – the ones here are surprisingly witty. (I'm still trying to figure out how Burton accomplished his conjoined-twin effect.) When Burton's allowed to be Burton, the impish madman of *Pee Wee's Big Adventure* and *Bee tlejuice*

, the film is an offbeat, occasionally inspired flight of fancy, but otherwise,

## *Big Fish*

is – sorry, but this begs for the obvious pun – all wet.



## **HOUSE OF SAND & FOG**

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Vadim Perelman's *House of Sand & Fog* is, hands down, one of the five most depressing movies I've ever seen. I loved it. In outline, the film is a simple melodrama – a woman's house is, through a series of unfortunate events, auctioned off, the new owner refuses to sell it back to her, and their battle of wills spirals into tragedy – but it's a uniquely clear-headed melodrama featuring mercurial characters who are selfish, yes, but not without reason; you understand their drives fully, which makes their inevitable tragedy positively harrowing. Jennifer Connelly does stunning, career-best work as the recovering alcoholic who wants her house back, and Ben Kingsley is fiercely impressive as her Iranian adversary, as is Shohreh Aghdashloo as Kingsley's tremulous wife. Beautifully shot by Roger Deakins and deftly directed by Perelman, *House of Sand and Fog* S  
's power is only occasionally marred by James Horner's overblown musical score, but you may be sobbing too loud to even notice it.