

FILM REVIEW



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Curiouser and curiouser

Tim Burton's 'Alice' is a roller-coaster ride of spectacular visuals and adroit characterization

BY ROBERT W. BUTLER
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, KANSAS CITY

Built of wordplay and wit, Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books have long defied Hollywood.

They're too episodic. They appeal to the head, but a good movie needs some heart.

Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* has found that heart. Not a lot — Burton is notoriously uncomfortable with emotion — but enough for audiences to care about a yarn that could easily have been just about art direction.

Drawing from both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, screenwriter Linda Woolverton has incorporated universal themes of adolescence and self-awareness and adopted the familiar (perhaps too familiar) device of an epic quest to overcome evil.

This time around Alice (Mia Wasikowska) is 19 and no child. In the opening scenes she finds herself an unwilling guest at her own engagement party. Behind her back she's been steered toward a marriage with an upper-class twit.

Will she accept his proposal, thus ensuring a secure but smothering future for herself and her widowed mum? Or will she defy the conventions of straight-laced Victorian society and carve her own destiny?

Before she can decide, Alice follows a waistcoated White Rabbit down a hole to a magical world she had visited as a child but remembers only as a dream.

Now the odd denizens don't recognize her — she's practically a woman, after all. Nevertheless, she's drawn into a rebellion against the depredations of the comically nasty Red Queen (Helena Bonham Carter).

This land is populated with familiar characters: the Caterpillar, the Cheshire Cat, the March Hare and Dormouse, Tweedledee and Tweedledum. Most are computer-generated and given voices

by notables such as Alan Rickman, Timothy Spall and Michael Sheen.

Others are played by actors we recognize, though they've been tweaked into fantastic forms. Bonham Carter's petulant/bombastic Red Queen (a delightfully droll performance) has a huge bulbous head atop a tiny body. Her sneaky courtier, the Knave of Hearts (Crispin Glover), has an impossibly elongated torso that, in his black armor, makes him look reptilian.

And then there's Johnny Depp's Mad Hatter, a nominal character in Carroll's books who here is elevated to prominence.

Basically he's the Scarecrow to Alice's Dorothy, a madcap figure who serves as a confidant and protector.

Though his eyes have been magnified in post production, Depp gives a full-body performance that once again displays his brilliance. His Hatter may be comical, but he's also a borderline tragic individual who in reflective moments is aware of his own insanity — "I don't like it in here ... it's terribly crowded."

This childlike being nevertheless is heroic, risking his life to depose the Red Queen on behalf of her sister, the virtuous White Queen (Anne Hathaway, leavening a do-gooder character with a dash of subversion).

It all ends with a big battle between red and white armies. But leading up to that is Alice's discomfort as her role in the conflict becomes clear: She's expected to don a suit of armor, pick up the legendary "vorpel sword" and slay the Jabberwocky, the Red Queen's huge dragon.

So in addition to other compelling elements, this Alice is a real heroine, not a passive little girl, who must put aside her fears and rise to the greatness expected of her. This is a very smart move — Alice is a thankless role compared to the scene-chewing possibilities of the surrounding

characters, but Wasikowska gives her the right amount of spunk and fledgling sexuality.

Burton seamlessly integrates his characters — human and animated — within a computer-generated landscape that offers one eye-popping visual after another. There are chases through forests of giant mushrooms, spectacularly designed castles, mysterious rooms and corridors. (The 3D presentation is fine but hardly necessary; this one should look terrific in plain old 2D.)

Every now and then Burton pays homage to the Disney legacy (this *Alice* is being distributed by the House of Mouse).

Perhaps best of all, Burton never lets his story bog down. There's always something new to look at, laugh at or contemplate.

He beat the odds and made this *Alice* a real wonder.

Film Notes

ALICE IN WONDERLAND

DIRECTOR:
TIM BURTON

STARRING:

JOHNNY DEPP (MAD HATTER),
MIA WASIKOWSKA (ALICE),
HELENA BONHAM CARTER (RED
QUEEN), ANNE HATHAWAY (WHITE
QUEEN), CRISPIN GLOVER (STAYNE,
KNAVE OF HEARTS), MATT LUCAS
(TWEEDLEDEE/TWEEDLEDUM),
STEPHEN FRY (CHESHIRE CAT)

RUNNING TIME:
108 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

FILM REVIEW

As solid as the wind

'Up in the Air' has been nominated for six Oscars and already won a BAFTA. It's hard to see why

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

George Clooney as an actor is as prolific as he is talented, and has also proved himself as a producer and director. The downside of all this engagement is films like *Up in the Air*, which gives every indication that it is engaging with a serious contemporary topic, but in which Clooney is merely going through the motions, seeming to believe that his presence is enough to confer some sort of imprimatur of seriousness. It isn't.

Having said this, *Up in the Air* has been nominated for six Oscars, including Clooney's dialed-in performance for Best Actor in a Leading Role. As for the screenplay, it has already garnered BAFTA and Broadcast Film Critics Association awards, and while clearly picking up on a worthy subject at a time when it is particularly sensitive, seems riddled with rom-com clichés. Is all the critical praise simply because *Up in the Air* deals with the issue of people losing their jobs, and the fact that people make a living from inflicting this trauma on others?

This forms one of the plot stands in the film, but far from the most important one, and is certainly not enough to warrant all this critical adulation. What the film does with its serious topic is addressed in a dialogue between Clooney, who plays a "termination facilitator," a person whose job it is to fire people, and his new partner, an idealistic Ivy League graduate played by Natalie Keener, who seems to be channeling a



The terminator.

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mix of Sandra Bullock and Anne Hathaway. One of the employees that she has fired tells her during the termination interview that she was planning to jump off a bridge. Keener asks Clooney whether it will happen. He says that people say all kinds of things in the stress of the moment; it means nothing. "Do you follow up on them?" she asks. "No," he replies, you don't really want to go there.

The problem with *Up in the Air* is just that: It doesn't really want to go there. It wants to be a likable romantic comedy with a hard center, and while real interviews

with people facing redundancy were included to give the film a documentary street cred, it's all smothered in a sentimental sugary coating that ultimately deprives it of any real impact.

Clooney's character, Ryan Bingham, is a man who has divested himself of all personal luggage in carrying out his emotionally draining but highly profitable work. Keener's character, Anna Kendrick, can't hack the harsh realities that Bingham lives with every day, and the price he pays is his isolation from real human connections.

Then we discover, after meeting Alex Goran (Vera Farmiga), another executive who spends much of her life flying from one state to another, that he is just another poor sap who wants to be loved, and whatever appeal he had as the soulless commuter excited by his air miles and hotel privileges goes up in smoke.

Up in the Air wants to be serious and it wants to be funny and it wants to be light and airy. Indeed it wants to be so many things that it seems at times to be almost schizophrenic. The only character who manages to chart a

Film Notes

UP IN THE AIR

DIRECTED BY:
JASON REITMAN

STARRING:

GEORGE CLOONEY (RYAN
BINGHAM), VERA FARMIGA (ALEX
GORAN), ANNA KENDRICK (NATALIE
KEENER), JASON BATEMAN (CRAIG
GREGORY), AMY MORTON (KARA
BINGHAM), J.K. SIMMONS (BOB)

RUNNING TIME:
109 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

clear course through these choppy waters is love interest Alex Goran, who manages to be sympathetic as the worldly wise woman who plays the mating game with a harder edge than the boys. When Bingham discovers that she is in fact a more clear-headed version of himself, he seems happy enough to switch back to his old lifestyle, and nothing seems to have been won or lost in the encounter.

The film pushes toward a wide variety of topics, many of them interesting, but it fails to deliver on pretty much all of them. At any moment you can point to something good that is being done on screen, but unfortunately for *Up in the Air*, this is a film that is very much less than the sum of its parts.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

A Single Man (孽愛無盡)

Colin Firth has already received huge praise for his Oscar-nominated and BAFTA-winning performance as a man trying to go about his typical day after losing his partner. Based on a story by Christopher Isherwood, the movie, directed by fashion designer Tom Ford, transcends easy pigeon-holing as a gay interest film. It has been said that the beautifully crafted look of the film, not to mention the gorgeous costumes, make this "bereavement by Dior." Julianne Moore, as the close friend who doesn't quite understand, has also been highly acclaimed.



Nodame I (交響情人夢最終樂章前篇)

A classical music saga based on a best-selling manga about romance and the minor tribulations of a down-at-heel orchestra taken over by an ambitious new conductor. A major selling point of the film is its locations, with the story unfolding in the cultural capitals of Europe, including Vienna, Prague and Paris. Slapstick comedy, a good-looking young cast, romantic contretemps mixed in with easy listening classical favorites make this an appealing concoction.



Port of Return (靠岸)

Directed by the well-known Taiwanese cartoonist Chang Jung-kuei (張榮貴), creator of the popular character A-Kuei (阿貴), *Port of Return* (靠岸) is being touted as a new milestone in local animation. Production took four years and cost a reported NT\$120 million. The film recounts a mythical story about a woman using illicit magic to obtain love, only to find herself caught in a battle between light and darkness. Mixing the simplistic styles of the A-Kuei series with elements of anime fantasy and a strong moral message, *Port of Return* has a good chance of joining in the recent resurgence in commercially successful local productions.

