

My Review of Alice in Wonderland

For those of you who are not quite on the down low about the going ons here at the Cinemonster, October's spotlight theme is movies that we reviewers didn't like the first time we saw them, so are going to give them a second try. For my pick, I thought I would interpret the idea a little bit differently.

I for one, and I might be the only one out there (comment below whether or not you agree with me), **hated** the original Disney *Alice in Wonderland*. I get that there was supposed to be some deep meaning to each and every single little aspect of that movie and the tiniest of details are all cleverly calling the queen of England fat, but that movie creped the hell out my nine year old self, I didn't get it, and I tried to stay away from it the best that I could. Just not for me.

So when they announced that that Tim Burton was making a new movie for the franchise, I said, from a distance, "Cool, if anyone can make that movie, it's Burton" and proceeded to never bother getting around to seeing it when it came out. Fast forward to the present day, however, I'm looking for a movie to review, and I saw Burton's version there in the instant watch. I'm told myself, "Hey, I'm about ten to twelve years older than the last time I tried one of these movies. I'm older, wiser, and in *college*. I think I can handle this film. Bring it Burton".

In the end, I didn't need to concern myself too much; what was brought was not a whole lot.

The movie picks up the titular Alice (played by a wispy Mia Wasikowska) a number of years after her first foray into Wonderland, after dismissing the whole event as a dream, and after growing up to be a pretty girl of nineteen who is about to be pressured into marrying a man she doesn't love. At the party in which the question is to be popped, however, the familiar White Rabbit (voiced by Michael Sheen) catches her eye and she chases him back down the rabbit hole and back into Wonderland. There she rediscovers a land that is now under the tumultuous rule of the Red Queen (Helena Bonham Carter; this is, remember, a Burton piece). From there, she is thrown into this whimsical world of talking animals and Mad Hatters (the Johnny Depp vehicle of the movie); of prophecies and Jabberwockies (whose four lines are spoken by none other than Christopher "Count Dooku/Sarumon" Lee).

All of this whimsy is beautifully done. As I suspected, that "Burton aesthetic" that he is famous for permeates through this piece, is absolutely appropriate for the subject matter, and

consequently, *Wonderland* is unmistakably one of his movies. This so closely uses the zany, phantasmagorical visual style of Burton's other movies that *Wonderland* could practically be called the spiritual sequel to 2005's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Of course, that is also a negative trait to the movie; so much of it **does** feel reused, recycled, and reprocessed that it hardly stands out in his body of work. While the sweeping landscapes are expertly rendered, they have exactly the same dreary morbid qualities of all of his other work, but actually toned down a bit for the PG rating. He took no chances with the design of the movie; it was all rather tame, which is a shame, considering the nonsensicality of the source material; there was a lot he could have ran with. This is a movie that could have been as "far down the rabbit hole" as *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, although Burton only produced that one. Instead, he could have at least aped things from his own version of *Nightmare*, *Corpse Bride* to spice things up a bit. Instead, what was made was a shame because he uses all of this technology to create a really slick product, but underneath that slickness is such a cookie cutter design.

When the design chose not to bring its A game to the table, apparently the script followed suit; though it's really a chicken or the egg conversation between the two. For all of the blandness of the design work, the movie really didn't have much going for it coming from the script. While the narrative relies heavily on the second book of the series, *Beyond the Looking Glass*, for its themes, characters, and locations, it also pulls a lot from the first and more familiar novel, such as the quintessential Mad Hatter. What this means is a totally new script that doesn't resemble either story very much past using the characters from the books it's adapting. In a way, it becomes fun to point out all the different references throughout the movie with their various winks and nods to what came before it, but that can't quite make things ok. Love them or hate them, Carroll's novels had a complex point to them, and while nine year old me had no patience or appreciation for his insane satire, the books were clever, intelligent, and most importantly, specifically put together. For Burton and his crew to come in and pick and choose what to use and what to throw out, to patch together a new movie from such intricately woven stories just ended up falling flat. Sure it's cute to see Johnny Depp play Johnny Depp as the Mad Hatter, but the commentary that the original character made was completely lost in this Hollywoodized action/adventure plot. Instead of following suit of the original whimsical stories which teetered on the edge of insanity, Burton chose to stick with the plain old "hero's quest" archetypal story that we all know so well. As with the design work, while Burton has shown us before that he is no stranger to the bizarre, instead of taking this opportunity to push boundaries with the plot, he played it safe and rehashed another standard movie.

As for the performances, everyone was right where they needed to be. The movie had such an unbalanced big-name star-to-easiness-of-role ratio that there weren't really any stinkers. Burton clearly started the casting process by establishing his heavy hitters first with

Depp and Bonham Carter (I think it's very telling that the cast list on IMDB starts with the Depp as the Mad Hatter, while the title character gets second billing). From there, Burton apparently wore out his role-a-dex making calls because he was clearly not satisfied with merely a few known names, but instead got such stars as Wasikowska, Sheen, Anne Hathaway (the White Queen), Stephen Fry (the Cheshire Cat), and Alan Rickman (the Blue Caterpillar). Each did performed admirably, but without much backup from the script, they all just went through the motions.

Overall, I didn't *hate* this movie. I really didn't. It was perfectly enjoyable and fun to watch as this movie in 2D while it was clearly a vehicle to show off their prowess at 3D. Whatever. The disappointing thing was here is a director who is **known** so crazy fantasy making a movie based off of a crazy fantastic story, with access to all the technology he needs and literally every major role played by an A class actor; on paper, this equation is a sure-fire brilliant push of the envelope. In practice, however, this attempt at Alice in Wonderland forgets it where it was drawing from and thus fell flatly into the middle of the well worn road.

I don't know if watching this movie has inspired me to go back and rewatch the classic Disney version, but it **has** inspired never to rewatch **this** version.

I give this one and a half crazy topsy-turvy ruins that speak in riddles and are a commentary on the bursting of the housing market bubble.