Alice in Wonderland

By Michael Allard  
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Film: Alice in Wonderland  
Director: Tim Burton  
Starring: Mia Wasikowska, Johnny Depp  
Review: Michael Allard  
Runtime: 109 mins  
Rating: ***

There's something exhilarating about hearing a Danny Elfman score rise up as the opening credits of a Tim Burton film begin. You know that magic and menace are on the cards, and that we're in the hands of a gifted filmmaker, whose distinctive imagination will be fleshed out by a group of trustworthy collaborators. The disappointment felt by some audiences of his adaptations is usually elicited due to pre-existing expectations of what a classic story is supposed to be like. When Burton tackles a book, musical or superhero franchise, he does it his own way.

In Disney's second production of *Alice in Wonderland*, the thrilling uniqueness of the director's vision thankfully remains. Despite being by far his most expensive film to date, it doesn't feel like he's compromised himself. He's also got Mia Wasikowska to thank, whose intriguing demeanour constantly hints at a mind that's sympathetic, but never wholly penetrable. Her Alice is 20 years old, no longer a child, but nonetheless confusing her family with a wild imagination and reluctance to marry a repulsive suitor. Live action and animation are fused convincingly as a white bunny appears, and soon we're down the rabbit hole as we'd expect. The film draws on both the *Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* throughout, and the first dream-like happening follows Carroll's first book by quickly making Alice drink potion that shrinks her and eat cake that transforms her into a giant.

Size is the staple of important plot points and the template for Burton's use of 3-D: we often see the swamps, forests and castles of this world from a *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* perspective that determines its otherworldliness. Helena Bonham Carter's head becomes enormous and the Queen of Hearts' childish tyranny recalls Miranda Richardson's Elizabeth in *Blackadder II*. Despite uncomfortable references to her
big skull being at one with her big-headed arrogance, making her the only human character given the
grotesque treatment, the performance is a joy to watch.

The first third of the film follows a Carrollian logic of nonsense in the randomness of its events, and
provides delightfully idiosyncratic versions of the Cheshire Cat, Tweedledum & Tweedledee and the March
Hare. An atmosphere of inexplicability remains for the whole of the film, encouraging you to take simple
pleasure in the oddities of the changing accent and out-of-body dance moves that Johnny Depp brings to
the Mad Hatter. Sadly, the weak plot, combining the inner-child antics of Hook with a *Lord of the Rings*
style quest story, means that the build-up to the battle between the Red Queen and her White
counterpart (Anne Hathaway) and the conclusive appearance of the Jabberwocky, struggle to match the
magical opening. Riding on bandersnatches and bloodhounds in the company of one great character actor
after another is nothing if not pure fun, but they deserve a quicker pace and a heightened sense of
anarchy. Instead of Danny Elfman, we have Avril Lavigne playing over the end credits.

One comment

Peter Jackson 21 Mar ‘10 at 5:27 pm

I totally agree with the comment about Lord of the Rings. I think Tim took many elements (and indeed,
many near-identical shots) from my films, and I think he uses them very effectively.

It did, however, distract from the main film somewhat, as I had to remind myself at several points that I
was not watching Lord of the Rings.

Whoops!