

Burton tells a whopper in 'Big Fish'

BY TOM PREVITE
STAFF WRITER

Only Tim Burton blends fantasy into film with such craftsmanship.

The director's movies defy convention with absurd imagery, creating gothic eye candy devoured by audiences craving cinematic nuances. The outlandish claymation masterpiece "The Nightmare Before Christmas" shows the extent of Burton's creativity.

"Big Fish" takes the same approach, though a toned-down one, in its visual storytelling, yet it treads into territory outside Burton's repertoire: a heartwarming analysis of the human condition.

Edward Bloom (played by Ewan McGregor in his youth and Albert Finney in his later years), a big fish in the small pond of Alabama, is a living legend. Or at least it seems so from the tall tales he spins. For years, Bloom has been charming everyone around him with his grandiose adventures — everyone except his son, Will (Billy Crudup).

After Edward alienates his son at his wedding, a rift forms, resulting in years of separation.

Only when Edward becomes terminally ill does Will return home to learn the truth from his father. He

MOVIE REVIEW

"BIG FISH"

★★★★

ONLINE
Read Tacque Kirksey's review at www.daily-tarheel.com

The story in "Big Fish" revolves around the idea of perceived reality. The audience is left to speculate as to what is real and what is make-believe, and the past and present become intertwined as Edward's tales become the focus of the film's progression.

As Will struggles to separate fact from fiction, you're immersed in Edward's stories.

The young adventurer travels across the country in his larger-than-life story featuring a giant named Karl (Matthew McGrory), a witch (Helena Bonham Carter) whose eye reveals how a person dies and a traveling circus headed by Danny DeVito.

And that's just the beginning. The main achievement in "Big

Fish" does not rest on its eccentric characters, lush visuals or strange surroundings prevalent throughout Edward's stories.

This is a film with heart — a look into people's struggles with accepting death, a reconciliation between father and son and the undying love of a family.

The casting is perfect. Jessica Lange shines as Edward's wife, Sandra, who struggles with her husband dying and at the same time attempts to mend the relationship between him and Will.

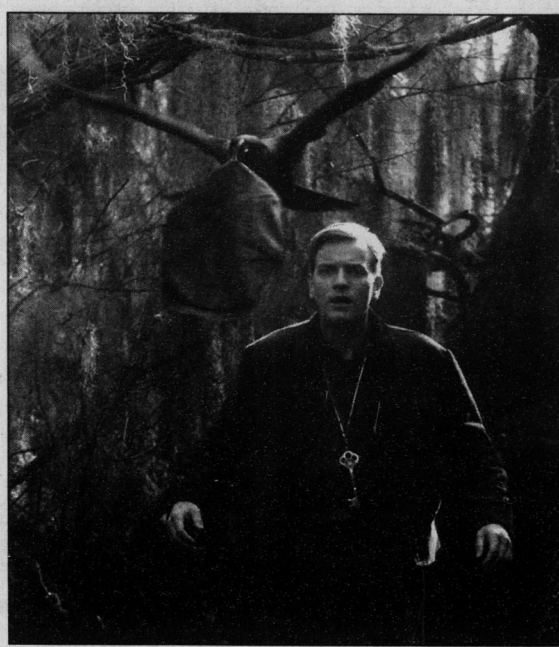
Crudup's performance as the determined, focused Will brings a real magnitude to the role as he searches through his father's past.

But it's Finney's portrayal as the elder Edward at the end of his days that takes the movie to new heights.

The aging man perfectly captures the spirit of the nostalgic storyteller while remaining reserved within the confines of his illness.

"Big Fish" is a two-fold achievement for Burton — an evolutionary step as a storyteller and a picture destined for the Academy Awards.

Contact the A&E Editor at artsdesk@unc.edu.



Ewan McGregor stars as Edward Bloom, a multitalented small-town adventurer in "Big Fish," director Tim Burton's latest fantastical fable.

Lead roles masters of the 'House'

BY MICHAEL PUCCI

More than anything else, "House of Sand and Fog" suffers from bad timing and a seemingly bland premise.

Based on Andre Dubus III's Oprah-endorsed novel, the film chronicles a desperate woman, an Iranian immigrant and their fight for a piece of real estate.

Unfortunately for the film, with more bombastic epics such as "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King" and "Big Fish" now ruling the movie charts, this might not seem like the most appealing

MOVIE REVIEW
"HOUSE OF SAND AND FOG"

★★★★

subject material on which to drop a few bucks.

But ignore this movie at your own peril. As a drama, it's utterly gripping, and it showcases acting of the highest capacity.

Ben Kingsley ("Gandhi") is Massoud Amir Behrani, a former colonel in the Shah's air force. After bringing his wife and teenage son to the United States, he now works less dignified jobs, such as a slot as convenience store clerk, to support them. They endure the prejudices and misunderstandings many immigrants must face.

Meanwhile, we meet Kathy Nicolo (Jennifer Connelly) at the low point of her life. A recovering alcoholic whose husband left her months ago, she falls behind on taxes and the government seizes control of her house, which quickly is put up for auction.

Seeing an opportunity to restore his family's dignity, Behrani purchases the house, leaving Kathy homeless and emotionally wrecked — the house was something of a family heirloom.

At the heart of "House of Sand and Fog" is the protagonists' constant search for identity. Both Behrani and Kathy use the house as life preservers. She needs it as the last tie she has to her disintegrating family (and life); he needs it to restore the significance and prestige his family once enjoyed.

Caught in the middle is Deputy Lester Burdon (Ron Eldard). He evicts Kathy from her home, and in short order, sympathizes and falls in love with her.

We sympathize with Behrani and Kathy though they are adversaries, and it's to the film's credit that it doesn't label one or the other as hero and villain for us.

In one of the film's most affecting moments, she makes a grave decision that brings them together and allows one finally to understand the other. That understanding, however, is hard-earned.

Burdon's intentions are far more selfish, and it is his actions that lead everyone to their tragic fate. The climactic scene isn't as surprising as it is ironic, as the importance of identity is reinforced as everything comes crashing down.

"House of Sand and Fog" is Vadim Perelman's directorial debut, and it's a promising one. Before it becomes bogged down in pretension, his story casts an almost uncomfortably captivating spell on the audience.

Contact the A&E Editor at artsdesk@unc.edu.

Epic 'Mountain' brings heights home

BY PHILIP MCFEE

North Carolina — whether genuine or not — has played backdrop to some dubious silver-screen flops.

The timeless greatness of "Bull Durham" is countered deftly by "Patch Adams," "Kiss the Girls" and "Space Jam," to name a few.

With Christmas came "Cold Mountain," a North Carolina-based Civil War epic featuring sweeping drama, filmed in both the Tar Heel State and Romania.

Central Europe might sound like a misstep, but Crash Davis and Nuke LaLoosh finally have company on the A-list: "Cold Mountain" is a winner.

The résumé of the film's writer-director, Anthony Minghella, features both powerful scripts such as "The Talented Mr. Ripley" and some scrap paper ("The English Patient").

"Cold Mountain" is an appended

MOVIE REVIEW

"COLD MOUNTAIN"

★★★★

adaptation of Charles Frazier's novel. Both the book and the film find Inman (Jude Law) deserting the Confederate Army to trek back to his hometown of Cold Mountain and his belle, Ada (Nicole Kidman).

Thrown into the mix is Ruby, played with gusto by Renée Zellweger, a spunky guest who uses her down-to-earth knowledge to help the solitary Ada tend to her father's farm.

Where Minghella's hand comes into play is in the arena of minor characters. He tampers with parts such as those of Sara (Natalie Portman), a grieving war widow, and Philip Seymour Hoffman's self-pitying preacher.

The cameos are all suitably com-

petent, with the actors adding adequate moxie to their minor roles. Even Jack White (yes, that one) does well as a traveling musician with a soft spot for the fiery Ruby.

But it's in Zellweger's performance that the movie reaches a high point. Her embattled, spark-plug personality makes her an audience favorite, not to mention an Oscar shoe-in.

As sporadic as Kidman's wailing accent is, her portrayal of a distressed Southern belle nicely complements Law's shell-shocked, taciturn performance. The put-upon pair provide a sense of romance heightened to meet the caliber of the cast.

"Cold Mountain" is no "Gone With the Wind," but it has enough touching moments and broad shots to win over most cynical theater crowds.

Matching the scope of the

romance is the film's sweeping sense of visuals. With the exception of some creative geography, the movie paints vivid portraits of both the placid, rural South and the raging battles of the Civil War.

As North Carolina movies go, "Cold Mountain" errs more on the rich, baroque side of "The Last of the Mohicans" rather than in the kitschy arena of "I Know What You Did Last Summer."

A production long in coming, "Cold Mountain" finally brings Old Hollywood to North Carolina's old hills.

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