

Into the Rabbit Hole

Movie of the week: "Finding Neverland"

By Clemens Matuschek

You do not necessarily have to believe in fairies to be able to like, even love "Finding Neverland". But it certainly will help, since the film involves belief in fantasy and imagination – it is, after all, about the genesis of the play "Peter Pan."

The screenplay by David Magee (based on the 1998 play, "The Man who was Peter Pan" by Allan Knee) is set in Edwardian London of 1903, one year before the actual premiere of "Peter Pan". Playwright Sir J.M. Barrie (Johnny Depp) has just suffered a flop and struggles for inspiration. He encounters an odd muse: the widow Sylvia Llewelyn Davies (Kate Winslet) and her four boys, who give him the idea of re-discovering his childhood by writing "Peter Pan".

Toward the story's ending, the youngest boy, Peter, who not only gives his name to the new play's main character but has a special relation to Barrie, puts the obvious into words: Sir Barrie never really grew up himself, he *is* Peter Pan.

Alas, like Peter Pan and his creator, the screenplay itself does not want to grow up, but carefully avoids dealing with major issues. The possible fact that Barrie's relation to a beautiful widow might exceed a stage of friendliness is just as briefly touched as the accusation of pedophilia that the historic Barrie had to face. Presuming that imagination is a cure for poverty – in this case, the Davies family's – is charming, but it is also naïve.

Similar to the play "Peter Pan" itself and its most popular picturization "Hook", "Finding Neverland" not only

touches the edge of cheesiness but sometimes crosses it. When depicting children's fantasies, Hollywood, it seems, cannot be kept from overblowing it. And the screen has had enough precocious children.

Still, director Marc Foster succeeds in deeply moving this spectator by expressing subtle feelings through charming pictures. He often cross-fades from the real world to the imagined one (shared by Barrie and the children), transforms the Davies' garden into Neverland's jungle, or the porch into a pirate ship.

In one of the most symbolic scenes, both Barrie and his wife open the doors of their single, separate bedrooms. But whereas hers leads into the darkness of an ordinary chamber, his swings wide open to reveal an idyllic, beautiful landscape. At this point, one is willing to follow Barrie into the Rabbit Hole to find Neverland.

The excellent actors greatly contribute to this appeal, primarily Johnny Depp. You might very well find Neverland in his dreamy brown eyes, underlined by a distinctive Scottish accent – in one word, the perfect movie Barrie.

It is doubtful whether director Foster's Barrie can compete with the line-up of illustrious heroes populating this year's movie screens – Howard Hughes, Ray Charles – in the upcoming Academy Awards. But beyond that, "Finding Neverland" will find its place in the hearts, memories, and DVD collections of literature enthusiasts, romantic couples, Anglophiles, and the young and the young at heart. That's reward in itself.