

# Film

## FORREST GUMP Director: Robert Zemeckis

Robert Zemeckis' latest blockbuster is an undeniably cute package. Technically, it's state-of-the-art, with the wizards of industrial light and magic effortlessly popping its hero alongside Lyndon Johnson and Dick Nixon in contemporary newscasts (even if the same tricks seemed snappier in Woody Allen's *Zelig*); and there's something so damned comfy about sitting back and watching Tom Hanks and Sally Field lavishing their considerable skills on the hokum the script unrelentingly dishes out.

Working from a Winston Groom novel, Eric Roth spins out an allegory worthy of Frank Capra. Forrest Gump is a simple country lad, brought up by his plucky solo mum on corn-fed gems like: "Life is like a box of chocolates - you never know what you're gonna get." A childhood reared on such philosophy propels our hero through three decades; from valour in the fields of Vietnam, through stardom on the table-tennis court, to successful computer millionaire and eccentric cross-country jogger.

Roth does a smooth job with the words, but the music has more to answer for. It sets off with tinkling new age piano, as the symbolic feather floats down to earth during the opening credits, and most events throughout the film seem plotted by popular songs of the period. Only occasionally, as when the wheelchair-bound Lieutenant Dan and Gump weave their way through New York traffic to the strains of 'Everybody's Talkin'', is there any real ingenuity in the choice.

"We sure got you straightened out, boy," says Gump's family doctor later on in the film, and it worries me that *Forrest Gump* could be seen as an apologia for the great over-washed majority out there. The seminal social protest movements in the 60s are lampooned, and the various 'outsider' characters, such as the shrimp-obsessed, Bubby are crudely one-dimensional.

Potentially the most interesting person in the film is not Gump himself, but Robin Wright's Jenny, who is more at the mercy of

her fluctuating fortunes. We meet her as Gump's loyal ally on the school bus and follow her career as it plummets on a sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll spiral (even including a stint as Bobby Dylan, singing 'Blowin' in the Wind' in the buff at a strip club). The film establishes a childhood of abuse, but brutally disposes of her at the hands of some un-named virus, for little reason, it seems, except to give Gump a second opportunity for a mawkish cemetery soliloquy.

Zemeckis is a name that I associate with gimmicks. Goldie Hawn with a perforated midriff and Meryl Streep with a rotating head in *Death Becomes Her*; the Toon Town cross-overs of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. Slick tricks sit uneasily in the cosy ambience of *Forrest Gump*, and there are too many of them — young Gump's braces bursting from his legs as he flees from bullies; a collage of Lieutenant Dan's forefathers dying in the battlefield, generation by generation; and Gump's unwitting inspiration of the 'Shit Happens' T-shirt.

It's the nudging, and the subsequent manipulation, that disturbs. Zemeckis seems reluctant to let potent images speak for themselves. There is a magical moment after Jenny's death when we see Gump framed in domestic solitude. It's a few precious seconds and then... a tinkling piano breaks the spell. When Gary Sinise's Lieutenant Dan berates Gump in the military hospital for not letting Destiny take its course, it seems we might finally get some genuinely tough talk... until Sinise and script take recourse in the sort of overblown hysteria that gives American movies a bad name.

What then are *Forrest Gump's* virtues, apart from its prodigious box office returns? Without a doubt, it's the luminous performance of Tom Hanks. *Forrest Gump* is far from reality, but Hanks may well convince some otherwise.

WILLIAM DART

## THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS Director: Henry Selick

This project was a gleam in an ambitious Tim Burton's eye over a decade ago when Burton was working as an assembly-line animator at Disney Studios. After the success of *Beetlejuice* and *Batman*, *Nightmare* became a reality. Then, after three years of stop-action slog, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* was a Halloween treat for American cinema audiences last October.

The film is set in Halloweentown, a Never

Land of bizarre creatures who look to Jack Skellington, the Pumpkin King, for inspiration and guidance in making each Halloween more scary than the one which preceded it. Jack, the perfect Byronic hero, given to adventure and soul-searching in equal parts, finds himself in the colourful Christmastown and decides to hijack the festive season for himself and his colleagues.

*Nightmare* is unrelenting in its visual invention, and replete with references to everything from *The Wizard of Oz* to those strange paintings of Arcimboldo which create human forms from fruit and vegetables (the villainous Oogie Boogie is revealed as a seething mass of bugs and insects). Caroline Thompson's script is crisp and quippy, as are the lyrics of the many songs which pepper the film.

The music, written by Danny Elfman, veers between Kurt Weill and Sondheim at its best, only occasionally slipping into Lloyd Webber Land at moments like Jack's graveyard lament. Ken Page has the gravelly style worthy of Satchmo himself when, as the villainous Oogie Boogie, he performs the star turn of the movie, and momentary transformations of such seasonal ditties as 'Jingle Bells' and 'Winter Wonderland' are pure Tom Waits.

For all its black humour — and much of it is very funny indeed — *Nightmare* could be seen as a stirring romantic gesture for our prosaic world of the mid-90s. Perhaps we might be encouraged to identify with Jack and that most loyal and resourceful of rag dolls, Deadly Nightshade, locked by fate in their bleak expressionist landscape. And perhaps the yuletide take-over has overtones of appropriation and colonialism for our politically knowing times...

*The Nightmare before Christmas* is a brave and brilliant film and, I would imagine, a right devil to market. Even with its modest 75 minutes running time, it is too sophisticated for some children, too disturbing for others, and too many adults, alas, may not even be aware of its existence.

WILLIAM DART

## SPIDER AND ROSE Director: Bill Bennett

Yet another reminder of what slick product is coming out of Australian studios these days, *Spider and Rose* is a road movie with more twists than the Pacific Coast Highway. The situation is classic, trapping seemingly irreconcilable personalities together and letting sparks

fly. Feisty Rose is played by veteran actor Ruth Cracknell, best known as the dominating Mum in the Australian sitcom *Mother and Son*. Rose survives a traumatic car accident to find herself on a seven hour ambulance ride with young and recalcitrant driver Spider (Simon Bossell). Well before she tosses his Dead Kennedys tape out the window there's friction, although by the end of the film the two are firm mates.

Basically, *Spider and Rose* is a feel-good movie, artfully designed to send you out of the theatre with a dose of the warm fuzzies. Yet the nicely abrasive playing of Cracknell and Bossell averts any danger of easy sentimentality and, en route, the film is not afraid to tackle the marginalisation of older people. As Cracknell says at one point: "What do you do when your mind wants to dance but your body wants to die?" When she does finally dance, it's a slow foxtrot with Jack the beekeeper to a local bush band playing 'They Tried to Tell Us We're Too Young', but hold in there — it's not too long before Spider and Rose pull off the coup of the movie.

WILLIAM DART

## THE MASK Director: Charles Russell

This film is ultimately the triumph of the techno-wizzes of industrial light and magic, the moment Jim Carrey dons his bilious green mask. With the oleaginous voice of a thousand television voice-overs ("Party... because I've got to!"), and a seemingly india-rubber body which defies and indeed challenges all manner of physical abuse, he's simply marvellous. Some of the triumph is Carrey the actor's, for he does some dazzling 'set pieces', from a string of 'classic' movie deaths, at the Coco Bongo Nightclub, to the manic Cuban Pete, leading conga lines with a chic-a-boom chorus Carmen Miranda would have given a kilo of fruit for.

While there's enough of all this to keep *The Mask* bubbling along, the film is just a little hokum when Carrey's in his day-to-day character as Stanley Ipkiss, the doormat bank teller. Surrounded by a cast that is somewhat less than memorable (Cameron Diaz's femme fatale is particularly wooden), one does find oneself getting most enjoyment from the settings that envelop the characters... but then, perhaps this is as it should be in a film that has so much of Toon Town in it.

WILLIAM DART

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