

**“LOST HORIZON”S AND JADED AUDIENCES: WTF! ABOUT “THE BFG”?
SPIELBERG’S SUBLIME ADAPTATION OF ROALD DAHL’S CLASSIC NOVEL ABOUT ACCEPTANCE
... STRUGGLES TO FIND SOME**

**by
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Okay, okay, enough about the title. But it did garner your attention, did it not?

Quite simply (and then again, not so simply) I wanted to share my thoughts on Disney's "The BFG". Steven Spielberg's wonderfully intelligent and sensitive direction of this magical cinematic gem, as well as its deeply felt, and moving musical score by our greatest living film composer, John Willimas, conjoin sweetly to create the finest example of a modern motion picture fantasy this writer has seen in some time. While most critics (very often the most jaded of viewers) appeared kind to the summer fantasy film, it was largely (ironically) ignored by audiences. Pandemic speculation abounds as to why. And following are two of the most prevalent theories which have been making the media rounds - neither of them to which I agree, BTY (by the way). And both of which I will shoot down in defense of this singularly miraculous adventure / fantasy.

FIRST - It has been postulated that Disney and Spielberg's reverent adherence to Roald Dahl's original title may have "confused" film goers, thus turning families against this obviously family intended motion picture. But if we, as a society, have become so illiterate as to not be able to see beyond three simple letters in a title to the glorious imagery captured so enchantingly by Spielberg, Williams, and a wonderful cast of actors, then I begin to wonder if we ourselves haven't begun to succumbed to the pandemic fear of intelligence and sophistication which is currently paralyzing the nation both politically and philosophically. The poster art, advertising, and trailers for the Disney release, not to mention the studio "brand" itself, clearly identified it as a family friendly movie. It's difficult to imagine that anyone with eyes to see or ears to hear could have misconstrued the content or family friendly message of this Steven Spielberg Summer attraction. Let's remember there was another Spielberg film, with just two letters for its title, during the Summer of 1982 which had no trouble attracting either a reputation or audience - "ET" anyone?

While each new abysmal action film franchise garners billions of dollars across the globe, a sweet, gentle family fantasy like "The BFG" has now, sadly, been deemed a commercial "bomb" by industry standards. And this is a tragedy, for Spielberg's film of the classic British children's novel is a joy on every imaginable artistic level.

WHAT, ... THE WHAT!?!?

SECOND (and most egregiously!) - The popular website "Rotten Tomatoes" reported a handful of writers expressing the astonishing opinion / theory that "The BFG" may have been interpreted by audiences as bordering on flirtation with child molestation, in that it's story concerned a large older man kidnapping an innocent little girl, while taking her to his home for some entirely imagined (or unimaginable) perverted purpose. Come on guys! This is an utterly preposterous supposition. We're

talking about the most historically friendly family studio in the world. Disney, arguably, invented the concept of the family film, while no other film director in history has been as child sensitive as Steven Spielberg. Let's get real here. The "BFG" ("Big Friendly Giant" by the way) is not a man in any traditional sense. He is an alien species, a giant from a land of giants. He's a gentle creature, no more "human" than the Yeti or The Abominable Snowman. In this instance one's own subtle perversions, lurid imaginations, or (perhaps even more likely) intensely heightened societal fears for one's own children (heightened to the point of finding a pedophile under every rock) are coloring one's journalistic judgement.

Perhaps remembered by many as the husband of actress Patricia Neal (who co-starred in the 20th Century Fox science fiction masterpiece THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL) the author of "The BFG" - first published in 1982, was the legendary novelist Roald Dahl (1916 - 1990), whose works include those other classic children's adventure / fantasies turned-to-films CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY, MATILDA, THE WITCHES and JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH, and the short lived horror series WAY OUT (which aired as a Summer replacement anthology for CBS, preceding Rod Serling's THE TWILIGHT ZONE in 1961). To this day one of WAY OUT's most intriguing attributes remains it's ability to frighten viewers with alarming effectiveness while being a series bereft of blood and gore. During the 1960s Dahl also wrote several screenplays, including the James Bond classic YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE, and CHITTY CHITTY BANG BANG, both from novels authored by Ian Fleming. He was also the author and co-host of television's TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED during the first two seasons of its lengthy run.

Well, I wonder if it has occurred to these overly self indulgent / self delusory writers that, by this very same irrational definition of child cruelty irresponsibly assign to "The BFG", one must just as well condemn THE WIZARD OF OZ? After all, the not-so-kindly wizard in the early portions of the beloved 1939 MGM family film portrayed the supposedly benevolent magician as utterly cruel and heartless, placing Dorothy and her innocent friends in deadly, life threatening danger; refusing their earnest requests for help, and reducing Dorothy to pitiable tears in her earnest desire merely to return home.

If intimations of child cruelty and abuse is to be the yardstick against which we measure "The BFG", then perhaps we must also re-examine the most famous children's novel of all time - which too concerns the "kidnapping" of innocent children for the purpose of indentured servitude and ultimate slavery, while their parents dream helplessly of their safe return - none other than J.M. Barrie's PETER PAN. For Peter himself is a selfish, ageless "boy", is he not, who willfully steals innocents from their beds with tales of adventure so that he might force them into lives as mothers, teachers, and servants, yes?

Disney's 1937 animated masterpiece SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS might also easily be ascribed this same cynical historic reassessment by analyzing the hidden motivation behind seven broken, perverted old malcontents harboring repressed sexual desires toward a sweet, unspoiled, virginal young woman held captive in their highly suspect sanctuary.

And of course there's that giant prehistoric gorilla who first kidnapped then ravished virginal Fay Wray by inquisitively tearing apart her outer garments, exposing her unconscious semi nudity, and sniffing her seductive scent in primordial jungles early on in one of the most revered fantasy films ever made...the original 1933 version of KING KONG Did this "perverted" act by a hairy primate provoke revulsion, and outraged cries of bestiality, or merely contribute to the wonder and charm of an iconic and inquisitive creature whose later courageous death in defense of his lady to this day induces tears of sorrow as he falls to his death from the silver tower of The Empire State Building?

While classic stories and films do at times contain subconscious, sub textual material, we must also, with common sense, remember that apocryphal quote often credited to the most famous student of the psycho-sexual metaphor, Sigmund Freud, wherein he is believed to have said that "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar". As such, to ascribe the aforementioned smarmy allusions either to Dahl, Spielberg, or Disney is insulting and, quite simply, damned offensive.

B.G. ON "THE BFG"

The Disney release of "The BFG" is a faithful adaptation of Dahl's children's story, with some of its original darker elements removed, and yet it is a wonderfully realized cinematic fable. Mark Rylance, the respected stage actor - who gained international recognition this year with his Best Supporting Actor Oscar win for Spielberg's BRIDGE OF SPIES, delivers an impeccable performance as the wistful, sad eyed giant whose love of children and nature drives him out of his solitude to befriend and rescue his tiny foundling, Sophie, from the dangers and perils of "giant" country.

Rylance is a master of dialect. And his endearing performance is brought joyously to life with subtlety, sophistication, and an ever twinkling and mischievous eye. The role of little Sophie is wonderfully realized by Spielberg's newest child discovery, Ruby Barnhill, an enchanting waif whose character's courage and bravado masks her own fear and loneliness as a resident of an orphanage in a seedy London borough. Her spunk, and determination to survive her travails in Giant Land are a perfect match for the awkward, introspective giant whose sensitivity and love of beauty keep him victimized by his more loutish neighbors. And the wonderful Penelope Wilton brings humanistic majesty to her role as the vulnerable queen of the monarchy with much of the same charm, and in a fashion not too dissimilar from that which she brought to her role as Prime Minister Harriet Jones when a regular cast member of the BBC's time traveling DOCTOR WHO.

The essential fantasy elements in this astounding fable are as old as JACK AND THE BEANSTALK, and yet the giant at the center of this re-telling of the venerable legend is a shy soul with the heart of a child. His compassion for his tiny "captive" - a "stranger in a strange land," is based upon the simple understanding that they are both children: innocents adrift in a world too busy to take notice of them. At times their roles even seem interchangeable as "The Big Friendly Giant" appears incapable of grasping the cruel reality of societal prejudice, while his small visitor, more wise and street smart than she has any right to be, assumes the role of the sophisticated adult and parent in their relationship.

Written for his daughter, Olivia, in 1982, the original children's novel "The BFG", illustrated by Quentin Blake, was an expansion of a short story in Dahl's 1975 collection, "Danny, The Champion Of The World." Dedicated to Olivia, who died of measles encephalitis at age seven in 1962, the beloved book sold well over thirty-seven million copies in England and The United Kingdom alone. After the death of his daughter Dahl lost his faith in God, and became an often embittered and cynical atheist. He wrote essays at the time condemning Israel for its Arab occupation, as well as a number of unfortunate, decidedly anti Semitic remarks concerning Jews. Yet, his agent and publisher were both Jewish, and he rarely allowed his sadness to color his writing...excepting his penchant poetic melancholy.

As such "The BFG" falls quite easily within the realm of classic Disney themes and presentations, most clearly reminiscent of their second feature length animated feature - 1939's PINOCCHIO. "The Big

Friendly Giant” is in many ways a descendant of Geppetto, the kindly toy maker who fabricates a little wooden boy so that he can have a child of his own to fill in the loneliness of his cloistered existence. Just as Geppetto creates an imaginary family for himself with the creation of an artificial companion and child, “The Big Friendly Giant” brings little Sophie into his world as the friend that he can never actually have. They are each children, after all, and as such they come to love and depend upon one another for both companionship and survival. In similar fashion their relationship reflects the reversal of roles between Wendy and Peter in Disney’s animated feature version of PETER PAN wherein the abducted little girl eventually becomes a mother figure to Peter and the “lost boys” in NeverLand, effectively reversing their original roles as “victim” and savior. Following this analogy, Captain Hook becomes interchangeable with the ravenous giants in “The BFG” as the villainous threat to the peaceful existence and relative safety of our beloved protagonists.

“E.T.”, “A.I.”, “BFG”, ... YOU GET IT!

Steven Spielberg has stated in promotional appearances that shooting “The BFG” was one of the happiest experiences of his career. A “child” of film, the director happily allowed his inner innocence to texture the flavor and persona of his first film for Disney, a company dedicated to the presentation of motion pictures produced for “children of all ages.” Spielberg is, then, Geppetto. He is the kindly father figure bringing fantasy to life, and shielding his millions of cinematic “children” from the reality and horrors of Isis, the Taliban and more. Sadly, however, whenever the director allows that inner child to run naked through box office streets, the cultural backlash from a world-weary populace slaps him back to jaded reality. For the last time Spielberg allowed his boyhood fantasies and vulnerability to dance exposed across the screen was when he directed A.I.: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (based on the short story “Super Toys Last All Summer Long” by Brian Aldiss) for Stanley Kubrick, who felt Spielberg’s sensibilities and childlike sense of imaginative wonder were better suited to directing the film than were his own.

He was right of course. And the film about a lonely little robot who wanted only to become a real boy became a failed cinematic masterpiece. “Failed” only due to its disappointing box office. It was too lofty, sublime and cerebral for audiences used to frantic automobile chases and blood spattered knuckles. “A.I.” was also criticized in some circles for its supposed sadism in the depiction of it's child protagonist, David, wonderfully portrayed by Haley Joel Osmet. At the film's climax, after thousands of years searching fruitlessly for ‘Mommy,’ David is given her for only a day, ...a mere twenty four hours, after which she will pass permanently into unconsciousness and eternal repose.

What audiences failed to understand however was that to David his agony had come to an end. He'd found the love of his life and of his being, and Mommy once again held him, kissed him and caressed him. In his timeless existence, a moment was an hour, an hour was a day, and a day was the wonder of all eternity. The final sequence in “A.I.”, when Mommy passes peacefully from conscious awareness to eternal sleep, and the little boy who could never dream joins her under the warm covers of their bed, united for all time in joyous demise (all of it serenaded by John Williams’ rapturous lullaby) is among the most heartbreaking and exquisite endings in perhaps the history of motion pictures.

It is no accident that Spielberg returns repeatedly to reflections of PINOCCHIO in his screenplays and films. Roy Neary, the childlike character portrayed by Richard Dreyfuss in CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE

THIRD KIND is himself a cross between the ageless Peter Pan and Pinocchio, ...forever frozen in time and space. He is as much an innocent as Barry, the impish little boy played by Cary Guffey, who is spirited away early in the film by the mysterious otherworldly "visitors". For when Barry is returned by the aliens to his grief stricken mother on Earth, it is Roy who replaces him on the journey back to the stars. When his often abrasive family members insist on going to play "goofy golf," it is Roy, the child in a man's body, who pleads with his wife and children to instead go to a movie revival, and share his reverie for Walt Disney's PINOCCHIO.

WHAT'S THE SCORE?

Not only did the film itself seem to not ignite the imaginations of the Summer audience at large, but even some fans and admirers of composer John Williams decried the supposedly unremarkable texture of his score to "The BFG" - they lamenting its simplistic thematic material, while yearning for the majesty of his earlier, more bombastic, youthful work.

Perhaps, once attained, one can only fall from perceived perfection from a demandingly critical public. And yet "The BFG's" sweetly lilting musical accompaniment, by arguably the most popular and influential motion picture composer in film history, is as lovely and unforgettable as the wonderful movie for which it was so enchantingly written. At age eighty four John Williams remains the most cherished musical figure of both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries - a beloved artist, and indisputably cherished international treasure.

As with those opinions and theories posted on sites such as "Rotten Tomatoes", the comments you've been reading here too are "opinions" and "theories". But it must be stated without anger, blame, or malice that contemporary audiences who decry the violence and supposed rampant sexuality of modern cinema, don't often enough put its money where its collective mouth is, ignoring the lovelier releases of each successive year while crying into the wilderness that family films are, somehow, a thing of the past. Where were these moral majorities when some of the films discussed in this treatise were realized and released? For not only was Spielberg's A.I. a commercial non-success. But so too, believe it or not, was Disney's PINOCCHIO originally.

If more jaded, cynical film goers, quite inaccurately, complain that "The BFG" is somehow bland, boring, and unimaginative, it is the opinion of this writer that it is perhaps their own loss of wonderment which alters their perception of this lyrically cinematic "Magic Kingdom" - a wonderful world and tableau of rapturous joy and color. "The fault is not in our stars, dear reader, but in ourselves." One must continue to possess this sense of wonder in order to preserve the mystical innocence of childhood. It is an ethereal summit to be cherished and preserved at all costs. For once it has disappeared, it is truly gone forever - a tender LOST HORIZON recalled only in the faintest of memories. A wisp of recollection sought so desperately by wanderer Robert Conway in James Hilton's immortal novel of ageless beauty.

"The BFG," Steven Spielberg's tribute to the wonder and beauty of childhood, is such an exquisite journey.