Movie Review: 'Penelope'

by Arthur Salm

One could have hoped that "Shrek," with its moralizing switcheroo ending, imposed at least a generation-long hold on the ugly-princess-with-a-curse template.

But that would have been a squandering of hope, which, come to think of it, doesn't do you any good when you're born, as the poor little rich girl Penelope (Christina Ricci) was, with the snout of a pig. Because it seems the snout-curse will be lifted only when she is accepted by one of her own - i.e., a blue blood. Until then, she is beyond hope, prayer and rhinoplasty.

'PENELOPE' - The cursed Penelope (Christina Ricci) may - or may not - have found her Prince Charming in Max (James McAvoy) in the fantasy film 'Penelope.' CNS Photo courtesy of Laurie Sparham/Summit Entertainment. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) (One of the risible conceits of the film is that blue bloods, these wealthy high-society types, all but carry some sort of DNA marker, and aren't where they are simply because some ancestor was more successful than his peers when it came to slaughtering or plundering or both.)

Penelope has spent her life hidden away by her parents in their sprawling mansion. But now she's 25, and Mom (Catherine Harris, way, way over the top) has arranged for interviews with a long string of blue-blooded suitors. The very sight of Penelope, however, invariably causes them to flee in horror.

Because those suitors signed a non-disclosure form, of course, the pig-girl remains a secret. Until, that is, sleazy photojournalist Lemon (Peter Dinklage) hooks up with one of those ex-suitors (Simon Woods, a great, great sniveler), who has his own reasons for wanting to out Penelope. They recruit a young wastrel named Max (James McAvoy) to get close enough to Penelope to secretly photograph her, but once the two of them start talking ...

A good part of "Penelope's" charm lies in its look. It's of this time, sort of. Lemon's newsroom looks like an alcove in "Brazil," while the city to which a scarfed Penelope escapes (it took her 25 years to think of that ploy? But never mind) morphs from London-like to New York-like to Downtown Backstage. Half the actors have British accents; half (including McAvoy, a Scot) seem to be American. You feel like you're in a pleasant nowhere, which, of course, is exactly where some kind of magic can take place.

The rest of the charm comes from Ricci and McAvoy. The intelligence and pain in her eyes actually draw yours away from that snout, while McAvoy nails, just nails scruffy and lovable. The attraction between Penelope and Max never registers much beyond what can be rendered from an old A.C. Gilbert's Chemistry Set, but after all, this is fun, low-key make-believe, not "Body Heat."

"Penelope" is an odd concoction - a witch's gentle brew of modern-day fairy tale, feather-light romance and slapstick comedy. It's not a knockout potion, but it goes down smoothly and is harmless enough to serve to the kids.

"Penelope." Running time: 1 hour, 29 minutes. Rated: PG. 2 1/2 stars.

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