

Movie Review: 'Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix'

by David_Elliott

Director David Yates called working on a Harry Potter film "like having a big train set." This echoes the famed remark of Orson Welles, arriving at RKO in 1939: "This is the biggest electric train set a boy ever had!"

'HARRY POTTER AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX' - In a vast storeroom of crystal balls, thrills ramify for (from left) Bonnie Wright, Evanna Lynch, Emma Watson, Matthew Lewis and hero Daniel Radcliffe in 'Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.' CNS Photo courtesy of Warner Bros. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Yates is no Welles, but we can feel good about the English TV veteran directing next year's Potter film. Why? Because he directed this year's Potter film. "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix" is one of the best in what may prove to be the finest movie series ever made.

Much more organic than the erratic Bonds, more richly textured and witty than the "Lord of the Rings"

trilogy, and not likely to dip like the "Godfather" saga, the Potters storm ahead as weighty, sumptuous entertainment. The fifth epic shows no loss of creative zest, though anyone not somewhat familiar with the prior films or J.K. Rowling's novels (which end with No. 7 this month) will feel at sea.

Teachers say the books have advanced youthful literacy. The movies have injected adult literacy and unfailing power of charm into big-budget fantasy. After five films (the novels can wait till my dotage), I cannot recall every plot thread, yet the unfolding tapestry still entrances. It's great to be back in Harry's world.

With Daniel Radcliffe now budding almost manfully, Harry is deep into disturbing adolescence. Nothing like zit problems, more like: Can he save both the magic and mortal worlds from the Dark Lord often called you-know-who?

Lord Voldemort (Ralph Fiennes) is taking over the gloriously weird universe again, marking Harry as special victim. In a typical Rowling masterstroke, the new internal evil at the Hogwarts academy of magic arts is Professor Umbridge, a fascistic pedant played by Imelda Staunton in stuffy pink outfits, like Queen Liz II as evil Avon Lady.

She subverts headmaster Dumbledore (Michael Gambon), while Harry wrestles with his painful past in a series of vivid hauntings and ghostly Sirius Black (Gary Oldman) seeks to help him. Big chunks of plot collide almost seamlessly, characters tingle as detailed visions, and humor takes some of the grim sting off Harry's crisis of destiny.

Inevitably a bridging work, "Phoenix" enriches the series' stunningly robust amplitude. When this is all over, the design and effects teams will need to be honored by royals in the huge dining hall at Hogwarts, because here is a series that feels like an entire film industry at play.

Being British certainly helps. The ensemble work is flawless, including all the familiars in the grand family of characters, even lesser fry like zoned Luna Lovegood (Evanna Lynch). Jason Isaacs is deliciously evil as

Lucius Malfoy, and for cadenced purity of snark lick your chops over Snape's (Alan Rickman's) speech that promises "to penetrate your mind."

The Potter films penetrate beyond that. Even in cute filler like the kissing scene, they invade our spirits with the charm of make-believe made believable by sheer joy of invention: stone walls that fold like accordions; Luna's pixie passion for pudding; centaurs cocky as lions; paintings like framed mini-movies; wands spewing incandescently; newspaper headlines snapping like "Citizen Kane"; maybe the most adorable giant ever filmed (Hagrid's brother, Grawp).

In movie terms, this defines surplus, as opposed to budget binges that only define excess. Excess can be fun, like the ludicrous "Live Free or Die Hard," but it doesn't match the gift of surplus spilling out to pour down elegant channels of craft and narrative delight.

"Here is God's plenty!" said Dryden of Chaucer. If not Chaucer in span or depth, the mod-Victorian J.K. Rowling has a spirit of plenty. On page and screen, her vision is a deliciously human (not just mythic) triumph of fancy, a spreading of soulful wings to lift us high.

A Warner Bros. release. Director: David Yates. Writer: Michael Goldenberg. Cast: Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson, Rupert Grint, Michael Gambon, Jason Isaacs, Gary Oldman, Imelda Staunton, Alan Rickman, Robbie Coltrane, Maggie Smith. Running time: 2 hr., 16 min. Rated PG-13. 4 stars.

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