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By Andrew Sarris

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**RETURN TO OZ.** Directed by Walter Murch. Screenplay by Walter Murch & Gill Dennis based on the books *The Land of Oz* and *Ozma of Oz* by L. Frank Baum. Produced by Paul Maslansky. Executive Producer: Gary Kurtz. Distributed by Buena Vista Distribution Co., Inc.

**THE WIZARD OF OZ.** Directed by Victor Fleming (and uncredited Richard Thorpe and King Vidor.) Screenplay by Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson, Edgar Allan Wolfe, based on the book by L. Frank Baum. Produced by Mervyn Leroy. Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

This reviewer wishes to file a minority report on *Return to Oz*, one of the most underrated movies of this generally mindless season. The critical naysayers seem to have been humming the lovely Harold Arlen score from *The Wizard of Oz* while they were writing their pans of the new arrival. There is no point, however, in comparing a 1939 musical with a 1985 nonmusical. As for the notion of some people that the new *Oz* should have been a musical, these same people would then have complained that the new Dorothy couldn't hold a candle to the late Judy Garland, and that the whole rock score by Prince wasn't worth one bar of "Over the Rainbow."

As it is, Walter Murch's *Return to Oz* can stand on its own as a creative children's entertainment, much closer, in fact, to the spirit of the Baum books than the wildly overrated *Wizard*. How much do I like *Return to Oz*? Considerably more than Ron Howard's *Cocoon*, infinitely more than Tobe Hooper's *The Goonies*, but not quite as much as Robert Zemeckis's *Back to the Future*, which should corner the kiddie market in short order, and which I much prefer to *E.T.* Indeed, the Spielberg crowd is showing commendable progress in treating human beings as something more than bystanders at special effects extravaganzas. I have heard good things about even *D.A.R.Y.L.* and *Lifeforce* from people whose opinions I trust. This would seem to indicate a growing maturity and sophistication in youth films, to the point that even the long despised and patronized parents are beginning to get a fair

shake. I shall have more to say about this unexpectedly pleasant trend in future columns. For the moment I would prefer to wander through the subject of child-oriented cinema while frankly acknowledging my congenital limitations as an "expert" in the field.

To begin with, I was never a child. When I was born I was already 42 years old. I wasn't quite a nerd, to use contemporary parlance, but I managed to have

too many people did at the time. It was something of a white elephant on its first run. In retrospect, I would fully subscribe to Otis Ferguson's description of the film: "As for the light touch of fantasy, it weighs like a pound of fruitcake soaking wet."

What has made the reputation of this theatrical flop has been its annual revivals on the tube for over 30 years. Its fakey, shallow-field set design, the self-

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as little to do with my peers as possible. Consequently, I can understand the nerd neuroses the Spielberg generation of directors seem finally to have exorcised in their emotionally autobiographical masterpiece, *Back to the Future*, but I'm a long way from identifying with such brilliantly crafted fantasies of revenge and vindication. The bullies of my early years have faded into the mists of time. After all, America offers everyone the opportunity to lose track of everyone else.

One consequence of my forfeited childhood was that I never read the children's classics. No *Oz*. No Alice. No Kipling *Jungle Books*. No Grimm's *Fairy Tales*. I was brought up in a European-oriented household where we talked of the "Americans" as an alien species. I was hooked at an early age on "ideas" and politics. No trivial pursuits for me. I read Victor Hugo and Anatole France and Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, and Blasco Ibañez's *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. Heavy stuff. Whole continents in flames. Not fluffy anecdotes like *Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby Dick*. What a pompous bore I was.

The movies that most moved me in this period were packed with political "messages": *Lancer Spy*, *Knight Without Armour*, *The Life of Emile Zola*, *Robin Hood of Eldorado*, *Juarez*, *The Road Back*. I did see *The Wizard of Oz* in its original theatrical release, which not

congratulatory Broadwayish archness of the three stuffed vaudevillians who prance about with Dorothy on the yellow brick road, and the ultraprofessional protestations of innocence by the overaged, full-bodied (but can-she-belt-out-a-ballad) Garland fit the requirements of an endlessly recycled television special rather than a convincingly illusionist movie. Even in 1939 I wasn't particularly charmed, and only fitfully amused, and I remain in this unresponsive state to this day. What I do recall from the original experience was my father turning to my mother at the end as if to say, "There's no place like home," even though we lived in a hovel at the time (depression era violins please, maestro.)

By contrast, *Return to Oz* isn't neatly wrapped up at all. There are no comforting homilies, no conformist counsels of resignation. What begins disturbingly ends disturbingly. Dorothy as incarnated in the immensely talented and remarkably poised 10-year-old Fairuza Balk is just the right age—and has the right temperament—for this adventure fantasy. Ms. Balk would make a wonderful Alice as well, with her Victorian sangfroid and little-girl authority. As the film opens, Dorothy is "recovering" from her Oz "hallucinations" during a Kansas tornado. Her Aunt Em (Piper Laurie) takes her to Dr. Worley (Nicol Williamson), a quack who is "pioneering" in electro-

shock treatments. He's assisted in his fiendish experiments by Nurse Wilson (Jean Marsh), who glares in very sinister fashion. A television reviewer complained that children would be terrified by Dorothy's being strapped down on an operating table in a Frankenstein-laboratory-like clinic. I can't speak for children since, as I have confessed, I was never a child myself, but I do have a driver's license certifying that I am an adult, and, as an adult, I found *Goonies* much more nerve-wracking and upsetting than *Return to Oz*. Also, the *Animal House* slapstick in *Goonies* lurched into the realms of the gruesome and the ghoulish.

Dorothy is rescued from the clutches of the diabolical doctor and nurse by Ozma (Emma Ridley), an older, prettier combination of alter ego and imaginary friend. In escaping from the clinic, Dorothy and Ozma are caught up in a storm and separated. Dorothy is swept down a swollen river, and is washed up in Oz where a new set of adventures begins. Toto has been left behind in Kansas and is replaced by a talking chicken named Billina, a change in pets from the cuddly banal to the chillingly bizarre. Oz is a shambles as the result of the depredations of The Nome King (Williamson again), Princess Mombi (Marsh again), and Oz's goofy-effete equivalent of the Hell's Angels, the Wheelers. The Scarecrow, Cowardly Lion, and Tin Man have been turned into stone statues—as have all the other inhabitants of the Emerald City. Dorothy rounds up a new team consisting of Tik Tok, a mechanical soldier; Jack Pumpkinhead, a brainless yokel; and Gump, a talking moose who flies through the air with a sofa bearing Team Dorothy in tow. The vaunted and expensive Claymation process comes into play with the changing expressions on the stony facades of the Nome King and his rock-being subjects.

The scariest element in the spectacle is the gallery of detached heads Princess Mombi uses to vary her own head from day to day. This unnatural transformation of the animate into the inanimate and vice versa is characteristic of the ~~more frugal~~ children's fantasies of the past. From bleak, bare, flat Kansas, L. Frank Baum devised a world of grandeur and luxury built out of the common clay of nature. This is clearly an outmoded vision when one compares it to the more fashionable Spielbergian shopping mall of material delights. The Disney people spent too much money on *Return to Oz*, as they did last year on *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. That, too, was an underrated children's entertainment with charming, but similarly dated virtues.

Of course, the designations "Disney" and "Spielberg" refer to magnetically supervisory figures—often only hypothetically creative—that have energized many individual talents into a collective expression of an age. There is even a linkage between Spielberg and Disney. Who can forget the unironic spectacle of an old general sobbing at Disney's *Dumbo* in Spielberg's 1941 (from a script by Robert Zemeckis and Bob Gale, who were otherwise not as sure-footed in the early '40s as they were to be later in the mid-'50s of *Back to the Future*)? The current Disney organization has had a run of bad luck without Old Walt on hand to sniff the Zeitgeist, but more should be heard from Walter Murch after his tenacious labor of love on *Return to Oz*.

Still, it may be too early for this ancient mariner of the movies to dive into the auteurist depths (and nuances) of Ron Howard's splashy lyrical humanism, Robert Zemeckis's frantic pacing to the point of adolescent panic, and Tobe Hooper's flair for the excruciatingly horrific. For the moment, the New Boy Network seems to be engulfing the old studios. The nerds have become the moguls, and only time will tell if they and their movies can continue maturing amid the entrenched childishness of the movie-going public. Fortunately, the archival assistance of cable and cassette can give unjustly neglected works such as *Return to Oz* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* a second chance. ■