



Toy Story

TOY STORY

Director: John Lassiter

It's tough being a toy, and there's a whole world of them out there we mere humans barely notice — or so this new animated feature from Walt Disney suggests. Working with the innovative Pixar Animation Studios, who made it possible for us to shudder at the 'saurs' in *Jurassic Park*, Disney have created a breakthrough in the use of 3D computer-generated animation in a feature length film.

Technically, it's breathtaking. The drawings have such plasticity to them, facial expressions slickly moulded to fit the droll lines scriptwriter Alec Sokolow gives them. With actors like Tom Hanks, Tim Allen, Don Rickles and Wallace (*Vanya on 42nd Street*) Shawn handling the voices, the film fairly crackles. Annie Potts gives Bo Peep a libidinousness one would not expect in a toybox.

There are some edge-of-the-seat showpieces, such as the toys' expedition to check out the birthday presents, Woody's ride in the back of a Pizza Planet delivery van, Buzz Lightyear's first attempt at 'flying' in Andy's bedroom and, of course, the final chase in which Buzz and Woody pursue their departing family.

The human component is more disturbing, and it's a testament to the 'success' of the film that one finds oneself identifying so readily with the toy contingent. The youngsters remind me of the malevolent children of Michael Smither's paintings, particularly Andy and Sid, as vicious a pair of villains as anyone could want. Sid is a regular Dr Moreau, with his collection of toy-monsters, the freakish products of countless sadistic graftings and transplants.

The adults at the screening I attended were transported — and not because of the free candy. After all, this is one hip movie, right from the moment when Mr Potato-Head announces his Plastic Corrosion Awareness Meeting. But there is life beyond flip. When Randy Newman croons 'I will go sailing no more', as Buzz lets himself surrender to the

dark forces of depression, *Toy Story* shows a more serious side, being a neat allegory of the rivalry and insecurity that troublesome testosterone can induce.

Poised to snap up the holiday market, *Toy Story* is infinitely more than kids' matinee stuff.

WILLIAM DART

IL POSTINO

Director: Michael Radford

I came out of a screening of *Il Postino* into a drizzly Auckland evening, and my first impulse was to rush back into the theatre for the sun-soaked Mediterranean climate the film offered. There were more than just meteorological considerations: in a week of viewing movies that ran the gamut from assinine to psychopathic, *Il Postino* was indeed a breath of fresh Mediterranean air.

This tale, taken from Antonio Skarmeta's novel and transposed from Chile to Italy to accommodate its star, Massimo Troisi, is about a chance meeting between the exiled Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (a phlegmatic Philippe Noiret) and his postman Mario (the fragile, nery Troisi, who died a few days after principal photography was completed). Neruda liberates the poetic spirit in his companion, and with it the inner confidence for Troisi to do more with his life.

Outside of the relationship between Noiret and Troisi, which is delicately nuanced, the film is, it must be admitted, rather ordinary. Maria Grazia Cucinotta's Beatrice has little to do except be the object for Troisi's amatory ambitions, although some of the minor characters offer illuminating insight into the energetic bigotry of the Italian peasantry.

The film is at its most effective when it explores the naivety of its hero. The scenes of Mario using Neruda's dictaphone to wander around the beach recording the sounds of nature for his Chilean friend touch the heart, and catch the essence of poetry in a way mere words sometimes do not.

WILLIAM DART

DANGEROUS MINDS

Director: John N Smith

Dangerous Minds opens with grainy black and white credits, as the students are bussed into school for the day. On the soundtrack, the gentle rap of Coolio's 'Gangsta Paradise' suggests a strange mixture of menace and resignation. Within minutes, help is at hand — Michelle Pfeiffer is signing in as home room teacher, and it's her lot to instill some love of the English language to a class who can't tell a rap from a sonnet.

It's baptism by rap for Pfeiffer's understandably nervous character, who puts her Marine training to good use at one point in the classroom. Soon the students are investigating the lyrics of Bob Dylan's 'Mr Tambourine Man', next comes the obvious connection to the poetry of Dylan Thomas, and then... Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, perhaps?

Despite the director's plea that 'one individual can make a difference', and his belief that education is 'learning through an inspiring teacher who instructs not only in the course work, but about life, too', *Dangerous Minds* ends up as a bit of a trip to Warm Fuzzies Land — the same land that made it possible for Whoopi Goldberg to turn her recalcitrant students into a snappy gospel choir by the finale of *Sister Act Two*. Yet, in *Dangerous Minds*, thanks to Michelle Pfeiffer's unflinchingly honest performance, the corniest scenes catch you in their grip — even a cringe-maker in which a youngster is taken to a swank restaurant.

The movie centres around the youngsters — although they're about as believable as high school students as Lulu's mates were in *To Sir with Love*. We learn a lot about them and their problems, but surprisingly little about their teacher. Am I alone in wanting to know a little more about this divorced ex-Marine who becomes a first class classroom tamer?

WILLIAM DART

PERSUASION

Director: Roger Michell

I suspect Jane Austen herself would have been impressed by this filming of her novel. Nick Dear's skilful compression of her compact, crisply etched prose into 90 minutes of riveting cinema is no mean achievement. Comparisons between novel and film, in scenes such as that in which the heroine discusses the masculine and feminine spirits with Captain Harville (a subject of particular interest to the present time), are models of the scriptwriter's art.

As might be expected, this tale of true love requited is peppered with all manner of wry observations. We can sneak into the genteel social circles of Bath, scurrying around that splendid dowager, Lady Dalrymple; we can eavesdrop on the heroine's visit with her old friend Mrs Smith, and gasp at the gossip of the garrulous Nurse Rooke.

It's the cast which makes the film — and how refreshing it is to have such a film without Emma Thompson! Amanda Root, recently seen in TV's *Love on a Branch Line*, invests Anne Elliott with a piercing intelligence, her eyes darting, sparkling and assessing with the acumen of, dare I say it, a novelist. And what a pleasure to watch the outrageous machinations of Sophie Thompson as the discontent sister Mary. Susan Fleetwood as Lady Russell, the persuasive force to be reckoned with, has all the style of Diana Rigg, and can currently be seen on the small screen in Michell's filming of Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*.

Some characters are more flamboyant — certainly Corin Redgrave makes much of the foppish Lord Elliott, and in the final minutes of the film, Michell releases a colourful circus onto the Georgian streets of Bath.

My only irritation is a minor one, and a strange slip for the usually meticulous BBC: what was a Chopin Prelude, composed in the 1830s, doing in a film that is set two decades earlier?

WILLIAM DART

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