Jason Robards is Charles Halloway, Vidal I. Peterson plays his son and Shawn Carson is the son's friend in "Something Wicked This Way Comes."

the movies
Louise Snider

Bradbury fantasy weaves its spell but muddles magic

By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.
"Macbeth," Act IV, Scene I

Depending on how old you were when you went to the carnival and took your first carousel ride, you may have been more frightened than delighted. Even for many adults, carnivals have their dark side, from the sleaziness of sideshows to the sham games of chance on the midway.

For science-fiction author Ray Bradbury, it is the dark side which stirs his imagination. His own youthful experience with a traveling carnival and his fascination with magic coalesce in his screenplay "Something Wicked This Way Comes" (PG).

Written as a film in 1962 and then written as a novel, it has been described as his most personal work. Its roots are in his short story, "The Black Ferris," inspired by an episode from his childhood.

The two boys who are the principals in the movie might represent different aspects of Bradbury's own character. Will (Vidal I. Peterson) is thoughtful and rational. Jim (Shawn Carson) is spontaneous and daring.

THEY ARE NEXT-DOOR neighbors and best friends. When the train carrying Mr. Dark's (Jonathan Pryce) Pandemonium Carnival arrives in town in the middle of the night, the boys sneak out to investigate it.

Will and Jim soon discover that the carnival is stranger and more surprising than anything they expected. It appeals to people's greed, tempts them and offers to fulfill their desires, but at a very high price.

The Mirror Maze lets people see themselves as they want to be. And the carousel, which can spin either forward or backward at breakneck speed, has the power to age a person or make him or her young again.

An old school teacher becomes young and beautiful again, but blind. The town barber, always lusting after women, becomes one himself — a bearded lady. Similarly, others in the town succumb to the lures of Mr. Dark and end up as carnival freaks.

The two boys, initially intrigued, become fearful. Mr. Dark tries to capture them by preying upon their feelings toward their father. Jim would like to be reunited with his father, who left home years earlier to seek his fortune. Will's father (Jason Robards) is the town librarian. He reads about what others do, and his own courage to act is under question.

THE LONGINGS OF the boys to be close to their fathers and to have them act heroically, and Will's father's wish to be younger and healthier, are important to the story.

The action combines bizarre events, nightmare images and a final cataclysmic storm. In contrast, the Midwestern town where the boys live looks idyllic, set among rolling fields and decorated with autumn foliage. Yet there is a menacing atmosphere imposed on the town with the cold winds, dead leaves and heavy clouds of October.

With more attention to telling details, to the subtle observations that reveal character, the director, Jack Clayton, might have matched the internal strength of the movie to that of its external appearance. The mothers of the boys, for example, are treated so skimpily they are practically nonexistent, and the relationship of an itinerant lightning rod salesman to the scheme of things is vague and puzzling.

This is still one of the best and most entertaining live-action movies to come from Disney in years, but somehow it doesn't quite live up to its potential. Perhaps all the attention to special effects was responsible for some neglect of the less showy elements.

Camp offers summer arts

Oakland University and the Oakland County Intermediate School District are sponsoring a Summer Arts Camp July 11-22 at the university near Rochester.

The program offers students ages 5-15 introductory level instruction in a broad range of activities including music, theater, mime, dance or movement, and art.

The camp is open to all interested students, whether or not they reside in Oakland County.

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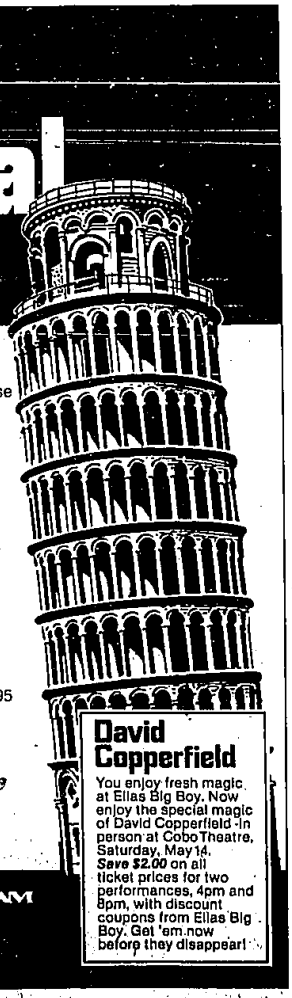

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