

GUIDE TO THE MOVIES

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MOVIES

Disney delivers a 'Peach'

BY JOHN MONAGHAN
SPECIAL WRITER

It's no surprise that Roald Dahl's stories remain so popular with kids. From "Willy Wonka" to "The Witches," he had a wicked way of simultaneously grossing out and delighting young readers. Now that his first generation of fans are grown up and raising their own kids, his influence shows again.

Film versions of those previous books are still favorites on video. "Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory" will even be rereleased in theaters this spring to commemorate its 25th anniversary.

Now comes "James and the Giant Peach," an adaptation of Dahl's 1961 book from the producer/director team of Tim Burton and Henry Selick. Unlike the fascinating misfire that was "Nightmare Before Christmas," this animated feature offers not only eye-popping animation but characters you can really care

The animated story is framed by live action, beginning with 10-year-old James (Paul Terry) living with loving parents on the coast of England. When Mom and dad are killed off-screen by a runaway rhino, the boy is placed in the care of his miserable aunts Sponge and Spiker (Joanna Lumley and Miriam Margulies).

One day a giant peach appears in the backyard. The aunts charge admission to see it while James discovers that the fantastic fruit is actually hollow, filled with friendly, boy-size insects. When the peach breaks loose and rolls into the Atlantic, James and his pals set sail for New York City, which his parents promised he'd someday visit.

"James and the Giant Peach" resurrects the puppet animation technique that brought Rudolph and Santa to life in TV Christmas specials. In a move that may upset purists, the filmmakers have used computer-generated enhancements to make the figures move more fluidly.



Peach-mates: A lonely boy named James finds some unusual new friends and unexpected adventures when he climbs inside an enormous peach and sets sail for New York City in Walt Disney Pictures' "James and the Giant Peach."

Selick has also fleshed out his characters. Where the problems of "Nightmare's" Jack Skellington were hard to grasp beyond simply advancing the plot, we

Retaining the English flavor of the story gives the movie a storybook feel. The vocal work is primarily British, including David Thewlis as an earthworm and Simon Callow as a violin-playing grasshopper related to Disney's

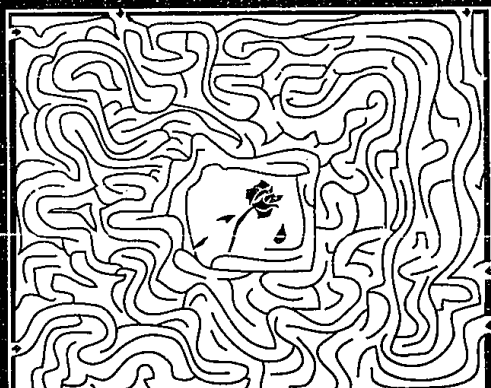
The voices of the American actors are a bit more brassy, including Richard Dreyfuss' take on a blustery centipede. Susan Sarandon does a fine Marlene Dietrich impression for the beret-wearing spider with spikey boots on her eight long legs.

The filmmakers have created some incredible set pieces. Blown off course by the centipede's navigation, our heroes land in a frozen world littered with the wrecked hulls of sailing ships. Consider this the closest that Disney will ever come to a movie version of "Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

In an amazing underwater sequence, James and the insect battle skeletal pirates, leftovers from "Nightmare Before Christmas" and Disneyland's Haunted Mansion. Then there's a horrifying mechanical shark, but I've given away far too much already.

To leave a message for John Monaghan, dial (313) 953-2047, mailbox 1886, on a Touch-Tone phone, or write him in care of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, Inc., 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150.

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