MOVIES

'Pleasantville' makes magic in color, black and white

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What if?

This has become a popular starting point for many recent movies with some spectacular visual results. First came "The Truman Show" based on the question "what if a person's whole life were just a television show."

Now comes "Pleasantville" based on the premise "what if someone actually found themselves living in a 1950s sit-com?"

Writer/director Gary Ross has created a visually imaginative and well-performed movie that is probably more interesting in its parts than in its overall impact, which is almost too easy in its not-so-subtle attack on the "family values, wasn't life better in the old days" crowd.

The movie opens in our dysfunctional times. A divorced mother rushes off to be with her boyfriend leaving behind her two teenagers for the night. David (Tobey Maguire) is a little backward, preferring the reruns of a classic old sit-com, "Pleasantville," to the bitter realities of his family and high school life. Sister Jennifer (Reese Witherspoon) is set on being the sexpot of the school and thoroughly up to date.

When the two argue over a remote control and break it, a strange TV repair man (Don Knotts, for obvious resonant reasons) provides them with a "super remote" that transports them into Pleasantville, taking the place of sit-com kids Bud and Mary Sue.

Pleasantville is part Knotts' Mayberry and, larger part, the Springfield of "Father Knows Best." This is a black and white world of twin beds (no sex), soda shops (no bars), meals on the table every night at six when Dad gets home (no working moms), basketballs that always go in (no losing) and books with no words, streets with no destination and no problems.

Jennifer is not about to put up with that kind of world and she begins the destruction of this perfect world when she introduces the high school's top jock to s-e-x. This opens the door for other discoveries, and as people break out of their black and white routine, their world takes on color.

This visual conceit is what gives the movie a spectacular look, and it is carried off with intelligence and artistry. Particular moments are magical – a ride through a black and white landscape as pink pedals fall, a rose glowing in a black and white landscape, a mural of blazing color on a black and white street, a once black and white soda shop now blaring with color. Sound, too, changes, moving inevitably from mush easy listening ballads to rock and roll.

RALPH NELSON/NEW LINE CINEMA

Dramatic comedy: *William H. Macy and Joan Allen star in "Pleasantville."*

Joan Allen as Mom discovers her sexuality and her independence from gently domineering and clueless Dad, played with dead accurate tone by William Macy. Allen, as always, brings *depth and reality* to the thinnest material. Mom also discovers her feelings for the local soda jerk who yearns to be an artist.

It is Jeff Daniels' character, Mr. Johnson, who finds himself in the discovery of color and the possibility of moving beyond the expected, the regular, the predictable. Daniels, who always gives subtle nuance to his characters, shows Johnson growing from genial, befuddled and stiff to forceful, assured and creative.

J.T. Walsh, in his last screen performance, shows again what a loss his early death is to the movies. His Big Bob is the voice of resistance, suppression and fear. The character is not meant to be a villain so much as a victim of his own conservatism.

Maguire is our guide through these changes, at first resisting and then embracing change. Maguire played a darker variation on this character in "Ice Storm." Here he is able to be both knowing and amazed.

The problem with "Pleasantville" is that Ross, who wrote "Big" and "Dave," wears his liberalism on his sleeve. I share these beliefs but find his attacks on conservatives and the religious right a little too pat, a little too simple. While some on the right would ban every book but the Bible, there are others who deplore the illiteracy that comes from too little structure. That's just one example of being too "black and white."

But his general point is well taken, art and knowledge liberate, and it is gently and humorously made.

Mark Twain's "Huck Finn" plays a part in a magic moment in the film, but it is two other Twain works, "The Mysterious Stranger" and "The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg," from which Ross draws inspiration. And the message still has resonance – without challenge, conflict, discomfort, passion life has no meaning, no color.

OBSERVER & ECCENTRIC GUIDE TO THE MOVIES

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NP HOLY MAN (PG)
WHAT DREAMS MAY COME (PG13)
A NIGHT AT THE ROXBURY (PG13)
RONIN (R)
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WHAT DREAMS MAY COME (PG13) NV
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COMING ATTRACTIONS

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"HAPPINESS"
Exclusively at the Main Art Theatre. Film about the messy and sordid private lives of several lonely people, who seek happiness in ways they would not want you to know about. Stars Dylan Baker.

"Slam"
Drama about a gifted young rapper/poet who, with help, finds salvation in his art. Stars Saul Williams, Sonja Sohn.

"SOLDIER"
An itinerant warrior of the future, trained exclusively for combat, but now made obsolete by a new generation of specially bred fighters, defends a band of settlers on a remote planet and discovers his own humanity in the process. Stars Kurt Russell.

"ORGAZMO"
Exclusively at the Main Art Theatre. Comedy about a down-on-his-luck Mormon actor who is introduced to the world of adult movies. Stars Trey Parker.

"PLEASANTVILLE"
Fantasy-based comedy about a pair of teenage siblings who find themselves mysteriously trapped in an ultra-wholesome, black-and-white sitcom from the 1950s. Stars Jeff Daniels, Joan Allen.

Scheduled to open Friday, Oct. 30

"CITIZEN KANE"
Exclusively at the Landmark Maple Theatre. A special reissue of the 1941 film that has been acclaimed widely, including most recently by the American Film Institute, as the greatest movie of all time. Stars Orson Welles, who also co-wrote with Herman Mankiewicz.

"LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL"
Winner of the Grand Jury Prize at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival, a Chaplinesque fable about the power of imagination set against the stark reality of World War II Europe. Stars Roberto Benigni.

Scheduled to open Friday, Nov. 6

"THE SIEGE"
An FBI agent teams up with a mysterious female CIA operative to investigate a group of Middle Eastern terrorists who are bombing New York City targets. As the bombings continue, U.S. troops are deployed and civil liberties are curtailed. Stars Denzel Washington, Annette Bening, Bruce Willis.

"VELVET GOLDMINE"
Set in London in the early '70s during the emergence of the glam-rock scene, the story follows the rise of a mythical rock icon who finds himself at the epicenter of the pleasures and decadence of the day.'

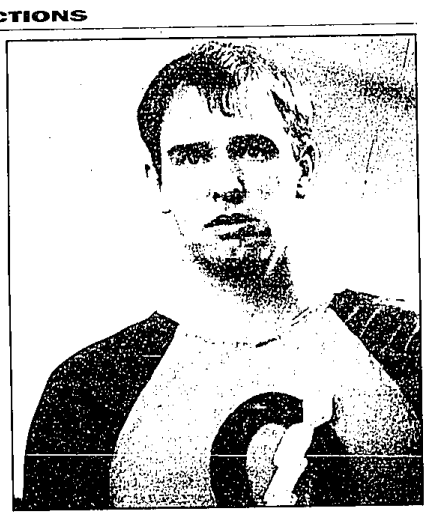
"THE WIZARD OF OZ"
Special edition re-release of the beloved classic on the eve of the film's 60th anniversary.

Scheduled to open Wednesday, Nov. 25

"HOME FRIES"
An offbeat comedy about two brothers obsessed with the same woman, one wants to marry her, the other to kill her. The trio's lives intertwine in unexpected ways that are orchestrated by the brothers' highly eccentric mother. Stars Drew Barrymore, Catherine O'Hara.

Scheduled to open Friday, Dec. 18

"JACK FROST"
Fantasy adventure about a man who becomes a real father after returning to life as a cooler guy than he'd ever imagined possible – below freezing to be precise. Stars Michael Keaton.



Comedy: *"Joe Young" (Trey Parker) in a scene from "Orgazmo."*

Opera 'Shattered Mirror' previewed

BACKSTAGE PASS

ANN DELISI

Well, after the summer break, we at Backstage Pass have returned in full swing on Detroit Public Television.

I know all you readers and viewers have missed us, come on you can admit it, you all couldn't wait for the return of in-studio bands, segments on the Detroit film and art scene and hints on all the weekend 'things to do.' There is a great lineup waiting for viewers on this week's show, including a piece on a haunted theater, the Detroit Film Institute and a band that has been quoted as, "combining the legendary supergroups of the late '60s and '70s and a '90s twist."

The percussion opera by Michael Udow, "The Shattered Mirror" will receive its world premiere on Oct. 28. Dave Wagner, one of Backstage Pass' hosts, is going to tell us all about it.

"This is a percussion opera based on the writings of the late philosopher and mythologist Joseph Campbell. The opera compares how societies over many centuries have explained the unexplainable. It really is a poetic work that explores the meaning of myth. 'The Shattered Mirror' is a two-act opera with three singers, three dancers, an opera chorus, four on-stage percussionists, eight players and two keyboard players. The characters are the sun, the moon, a wizard type character and the wind, which symbolizes the emergence of all living creatures. The opera also has four actual percussionists on the stage called the four grandfathers."

This opera really invites the audience to interpret the meaning for themselves instead of having it interpreted for them, so each person gets something completely different. The opera uses published poetry instead of narrative text which further allows the audience to be involved in the interpretation process.

The libretto was taken from the four poems by John Gracen Brown, Winfield Townley Scott, and Native Americans Alonzo Lopez and Patricia Irving, all of which were woven together by Michael Udow."

The opera opens 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 28, in the Media Union Video Studio on the North Campus of the University of Michigan.

The piece on "The Shattered Mirror, as well as the haunted theater, the music group Walk on Water and much more can be seen tonight at 7:30 and tomorrow again at midnight on Detroit Public Television.