

Movie Reviews

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Abigail Breslin in a scene from "Kit Kittredge: An American Girl" from HBO Films.

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Kit Kittredge: An American Girl (G) ***

By Rene Rodriguez, The Miami Herald

Walking in to see *Kit Kittredge: An American Girl*, I was unaware the movie was spun off from a popular line of toy dolls -- more than 14 million of them have been sold. Nor did I know about the anticipation and excitement many little girls have for the movie, which is the fourth in the series (the previous three, made for TV, are available on DVD).

I still have no opinion on the toys, but I can definitely vouch for the film living up to expectations. Shot with the burnished, luxurious cinematography of a big-budget movie, and cast with actors who never treat the material as if it were beneath them, *Kit Kittredge: An American Girl* is a thoroughly satisfying and engaging children's picture that never forgets those kids probably didn't get to the theater by themselves.

Director Patricia Rozema and screenwriter Ann Peacock avoid condescending to their target audience -- or, for that matter, to their adult guardians -- by treating their child protagonists with care and respect. It helps, too, that they have the amazing Abigail Breslin (*Little Miss Sunshine*) in the lead role of 9-year-old Kit, a bright and winsome girl in Depression-era Cincinnati who aspires to be a reporter for the Cincinnati Register.

Kit is constantly submitting to the paper her stories, such as a piece on the World's Fair, without much luck. But as the Depression starts to affect the lives of her closest friends -- and then, inevitably, her own family -- Kit's priorities change. Her father (Chris O'Donnell) goes to Chicago to find work and promises to return, but doesn't. Her mother (Julia Ormond), in a desperate attempt to save their home, starts taking in boarders, such as a traveling librarian (Joan Cusack), a magician (Stanley Tucci) and a fallen socialite (Glenn Headley) awaiting word from her own husband, who has gone to New York in search of employment.

The backdrop is grim, and to its credit, the movie does not sugarcoat its portrayal of how the Depression affected the day-to-day lives of upper middle-class Americans who lost everything in the span of a month and had to figure out how to push forward.

The filmmakers allow the story to unfold entirely through the point of view of Kit, who may not fully understand the severity of the situation, but is also more aware and resourceful than the adults around her realize. *Kit Kittredge: An American Girl* sends its heroine and her friends on several adventures, including a Nancy Drew-ish one involving some stolen valuables, but it's the movie's overall tone -- the innocence of children, as well as their surprising resiliency -- that elevates the film into something far more valuable than a feature-length commercial for toys.

Cast: Abigail Breslin, Julia Ormond, Chris O'Donnell, Joan Cusack, Madison Davenport, Zach Mills, Glenn Headley, Jane Krakowski, Stanley Tucci, Wallace Shawn

Director: Patricia Rozema

Screenwriter: Ann Peacock. Based on the books by Valerie Tripp

Producers: Elaine Goldsmith-Thomas, Lisa Gillan, Ellen L. Brothers

A Picturehouse release. Running time: 100 minutes. No offensive material. Playing at area theaters.

'Kung Fu Panda' falls flat



Using his noodle: Panda Po (voice of Jack Black) begins his study under Master Shifu (Dustin Hoffman)

By Claudia Puig, USA TODAY

Though occasionally visually inventive, *Kung Fu Panda* is a disappointment when it comes to matters of simple black and white: the script.

Everything that happens in this dull tale of Po, a paunchy panda who becomes a zealous kung fu fighter, is telegraphed well in advance.

MORE: [Jack Black tries his hands at kung fu](#)

PHOTOS: [Check out Black's kung fu grip](#)

That might not have been a problem had the storytelling been more amusing.

The story centers on the enthusiastic, if clumsy Po (Jack Black), a rabid armchair kung fu fan. Po's day job is to work in his family's noodle shop. When he's accidentally chosen as the kung fu master who will fulfill an ancient prophecy, he must rise to the occasion.

Despite the panda being voiced by Black, the humorous moments are few. If you're going to cast someone as singularly quirky as Black, then take advantage of his eccentric persona. The role is so straightforward, it could have been played by anyone.

And the supporting characters—a tiger voiced by Angelina Jolie, a crane played by David Cross, Lucy Liu as a viper and Jackie Chan as an agile monkey — are so lacking personality that you wonder why the filmmakers bothered to get such a cross section of talent.

Sure, the message to believe in yourself is a valuable, if often-heard, one for young audiences. But it could have played out in a more creative way.

Perhaps the most interesting character is Master Shifu, charmingly voiced by Dustin Hoffman. He whips Po into shape and reveals his own character.

One sequence on a swinging wooden bridge is a visual treat, especially when seen in IMAX. But the film's climax doesn't show the fate of the bad guy. This lack of clarity might have more to do with plans for a sequel than bad storytelling.

Perhaps children will be taken by Po's huggable appearance, but anyone older than 9 is likely to be bored.



Movie Reviews

by Bob Mondello

'Wall-E,' Speaking Volumes with Stillness and Stars

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Evolutionary thinking: Wall-E may have started out as a glorified trash compactor, but he's learned how to look to the sky. Pixar

Wall-E

- Director: Andrew Stanton
- Genre: Sci-Fi
- Running Time: 97 minutes

Rated G: Big-hearted and full of wonder, but too smart to be saccharine.

"The first hour of Wall-E is a crazily inventive, deliriously engaging and almost wordless silent comedy of the sort that Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton used to make."

[All Things Considered](#), June 27, 2008 · The camera descends, at the start of *Wall-E*, from outer space to a landscape that looks eerily familiar — and sort of not. The sun filters down through a brownish haze. What seem at first like skyscrapers turn out to be neatly stacked mountains of trash. Stillness is everywhere, broken only by the unlikely sound of a song from *Hello, Dolly!* — and a solitary figure zipping around a junk-strewn cityscape.

Apparently, humans never changed course on pollution and consumerism, and sometime in the 22nd century they were forced to leave a planet they had turned into a giant garbage dump. But they left without turning off a robot they'd left behind. He's basically a trash compactor on treads — a Waste Allocation Load-Lifter: Earth Class, or WALL-E — who has, over the course of 700 years, developed a personality.

He tries to puzzle out what mankind's detritus was for (a Rubik's cube, a spork, a fire extinguisher), and he saves a few items — an alarmingly fresh 700-year-old Twinkie, say, for his pet cockroach.

But most of the trash he compacts and stacks, in a routine that is interrupted only when he falls head-over-treads for a sleek robot from the stars: EVE (for Extra-terrestrial Vegetation Evaluator), whom he watches from afar so he won't be incinerated.

Eve has an itchy trigger-finger, it turns out.

The first hour of *Wall-E* is a crazily inventive, deliriously engaging and almost wordless silent comedy of the sort that Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton used to make. Things turn more conventional in the last half hour, when pudgy, machine-dependent humans make an appearance, but the glow of that first part will carry you through.

That and the majesty of the filmmaking: *Wall-E*'s world, in all its epic decay, looks real. You can almost taste the dust. And it's emotionally real too — enough so that a cautionary tale about the environment, and about big corporations that don't take care of it, and about getting so caught up in our gadgetry that we forget to look at the stars all take a back seat to romance.

So do some specifically cinematic subtexts. Director Andrew Stanton and his animators have slipped in nods not just to *Hello, Dolly!*, but to *Star Wars* and *Blade Runner*, *An Inconvenient Truth* and the comedies of Chaplin and Jacques Tati. More than just a nod to Chaplin, actually: *Wall-E*, with his workaholic scruffiness and his yearning for someone to hold hands with, might as well *be* Chaplin's Little Tramp.

There's actually a nice parallel between this largely silent film and Chaplin's first sound film, *Modern Times*. In that one, the silent clown used the soundtrack mostly for music and effects, not for speech, just as Pixar does here. Chaplin only let you hear a human voice a couple of times, and only on some sort of mechanical contraption — say a closed-circuit TV screen — to emphasize its artificiality. It was his way of saying to the sound world, "OK, everybody's doing this talking thing now, but look how much more expressive our silent world is."

For the first time in a Pixar movie, *Wall-E*'s filmmakers give a nod to the world of actual actors and cameras — and make them artificial in the same way: by only letting you see them on video screens, where they look flat and washed-out compared to the digital world around them.

But there's one difference. Chaplin knew he had lost the battle: Silence was finished; sound had won. In today's Hollywood, digital is what's taking over — in special effects, in green-screen work, in animation. And Pixar's animators, bless them, are at the

forefront, insisting that imagery created on computers doesn't have to be soulless. *Wall-E*'s images are filled with emotion, just as silent film's images were — even though its characters look like they're made of metal and plastic, and can't say a word.

Wall-E is being sold as a futuristic fantasy, of course. But I have to say I'm just as gratified by their look back 70 years to silent movies as I am by their look forward 700 years to a silent planet.