

# Were you spirited away?



See what Muse thought of all the hype

## Spirited Away

**Cert.** PG  
**Director:** Hayao Miyazaki  
**Starring:** Daveigh Chase, Jason Marsden  
**Runtime:** 125 minute

Proclaimed a masterpiece, an Oscar winner, compared to Alice in Wonderland in its imaginative compass, and hand drawn by apparent legend of Japanese anime Hayao Miyazaki, Spirited Away possesses a colossal reputation. It seems that this film, regardless of its quality, has to be seen just to compare it to the renown that precedes it. Being a pessimist, I prepared for the disappointment of deflated hype, only to discover that I was completely engrossed in a work that was so inventive in its array of spirits, metamorphoses and settings, that I cared little for what was said before I saw it.

If you are expecting a movie with a well formed plot, however, there will be disappointment. This film's strengths are not within its storyline, which involves the heroine, Chihiro looking for her parents (who have been turned into pigs), a golden seal and a vendetta between two witches who resemble diabolical lawn ornaments. In fact, for me, the ending of the story marred the piece as a whole. Sentimentality, in the end, appeared to try too hard to round off the film's sprawling fantasy. Instead, Spirited Away is so absorbing to watch because there is such a mass of different spirits, characters and successions of unexplained or unpredictable events that the film seems the most enjoyable when plot matters least.

From the endearing living balls of soot to the immense stench spirit, and my personal favorite, a bemused overweight mouse held aloft by a miniscule bird, Miyazaki's vision of an alternative world seems completely unfettered, which is refreshing amongst the many formulaic efforts of Hollywood produced over the summer. The tone of the film, too, does not

feel restrained, the artwork moving from disturbing to comic and sometimes simply haunting scenes when traveling to the different reaches of Chihiro's strange new world.

So, does this film deserve its rapturous reception across the globe? Well, mostly. I would recommend that you see it, if it reappears on one off screenings, before it emerges again on DVD and video. Yet, though an excellent and sometimes mesmerizing spectacle, the surreality of the film sometimes does leave unexplained gaps that simply can't be covered. In the film, forgetting your real name incarcerates you in the spirit world until you remember what it is again, and similarly, Spirited Away itself draws you in so much, you may walk out of the cinema, with a vague-contented feeling that you have seen a great modern phantasm, without remembering how it all worked together

Alex Newhouse



City of God- bloody and magnificent

## City of God- DVD release

**Cert.** R  
**Director:** Fernando Meirelles  
**Starring:** Alexandre Rodrigues, Seu Jorge  
**Runtime:** 130 minutes

Yes, it's a foreign film and yes, it has subtitles, but don't let that put you off this fantastic debut. Based on a true story of drugs, gangs and violence, the action is narrated by Rocket, a young inhabitant of the notorious favela of Rio de Janeiro: the City of God.

The film tracks Rocket and other young people of the slum in their oppressive world of crime, narcotics and fear where the residents are lucky if they reach 20 alive. The drug gangs rule the streets. If you run they get you, if you stay still they get you too.

Rocket grows up amid this background of death and corrupt officials. Through his ambition to become a photographer he stumbles on a way to turn his contacts in the Rio underground to his advantage; by photographing the infamous gang-lord Li'l Ze.

The inter-connected stories told by Rocket reflect the numerous layers and hierarchies in the City, from the neighbourhood kids used as low level dealers, to Li'l Ze and those who attempt to control them, with the motto 'kill - be respected'. It's a powerful and original portrayal of crime and redemption in an almost impossible environment.

Winner of numerous prestigious awards, City of God is gruesome, vivid and brilliant, utterly compelling. DVD features include the documentary News from a private war which shows the real life terror in the favela. The film is a masterpiece, the special features disturbing. No collection is complete without it.

Rebecca Carver



## Once Upon a Time in Mexico

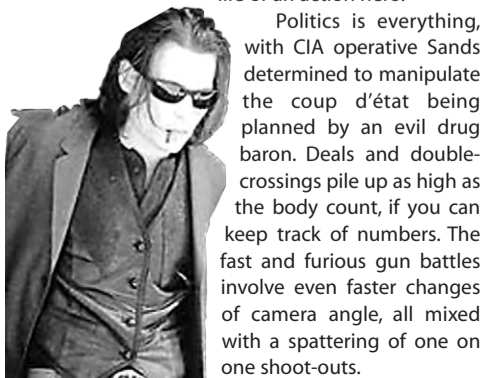
**Cert.** 18  
**Director:** Robert Rodriguez  
**Starring:** Antonio Banderas, Johnny Depp.  
**Runtime:** 105 minutes

Rewind back to 1995 and you may remember watching something like this before. After an extended siesta, Desperado star Antonio Banderas reprises his role as the guitar-playing, gun-toting hero with a price on his head. Inflation and all things considered, the stakes have gone up.

Riding high thanks to its US box office success, Once Upon a Time in Mexico ties up a vague trilogy of Latin American westerns by Rodriguez, which began with a modest \$7,000 flick over a decade ago.

Not that history matters very much as far as the latest story line goes.

Banderas is gunman El Mariachi, a living legend hiding out in the obscurity of small town Mexico. Enter one ruthless Agent Sands (Depp) with a mission in need of recruits and its goodbye to the retirement home in the sun. Still tormented by the loss of his alluring wife (Hayek), Mariachi struggles back into the life of an action hero.



Politics is everything, with CIA operative Sands determined to manipulate the coup d'état being planned by an evil drug baron. Deals and double-crossings pile up as high as the body count, if you can keep track of numbers. The fast and furious gun battles involve even faster changes of camera angle, all mixed with a spattering of one on one shoot-outs.

Rodriguez,s links with

Quentin Tarantino stretch across his movie career, but any influence here is muted, except perhaps in the sudden trigger-pulling outbursts and torture. The man behind Spy Kids is keen to stamp out his own style. Like Tarantino, Rodriguez did much more than directing. According to the credits, he shot, chopped and scored this movie.

On screen, Banderas is even more of a one man band, spending as much time in daydreams as he does dodging bullets. His solitary flashbacks and solemn gazes to camera will no doubt appeal to fans, but they sap the energy from what is supposedly an action movie. A promising partnership with his two sidekicks goes unexplored, leaving them with little to work with.

Depp emerges as the film,s selling point. Watching his increasingly corrupt character pull every string going compensates for the adrenaline deficit. The combination of mobile phone wielding tourist and Matrix-style warrior is intriguing, even for mainstream thrill seekers. His throwaway remarks are charismatic, and stop the movie taking itself too seriously. But even Depp stumbles. Attempts to stand out leave him looking woefully lost at times. At least they do in a setting defined only by repeated use of the word tequila.

Of course, none of this would be important if the characters were just there to shoot each other. But the film aspires to be more complex than the average gun-fest, and is weakened because it does not succeed. The decent action sequences are condensed, but there is nothing coherent to fill the void this opens. Although Depp,s character develops, the others do not break from their standard trigger-pulling moulds. The attempt to grind out a deceptively simple plot appears cumbersome. The result is an average movie - but one way or another, you feel it could have been so much more. Save it for a wet Sunday afternoon.

Clive Crouch



# Is Disney facing a kicking?

There was an era when Disney ruled the world of animation: its methods the most advanced, its films where finely scored with memorable melodies, and it knew not of such unpleasant words as 'demographic' or 'Phil Collins'.

Now, however, its peak appears to have been reached, and is approaching what seems to be an all time low. Apart from Lilo and Stitch, with a rather unconventional alien and Elvis at its core the late nineties has seen a litany of otherwise uniform, sentimental and generally unremarkable. Scheduled for November 1st the latest offering, Brother Bear, appears to be no different. It features an American Indian youngster who has been transformed into a bear by the northern lights. Judging by the trailers, this allows Disney to create its usual menagerie of apparently endearing anthropomorphised characters, while delivering its usual messages on the meaning of family unity, the journey of life, and all things adorable and fluffy. Phil Collins also seems to be involved in the score, there personally to ensure nothing as catchy as the Bare Necessities is ever written



under his watchful eye. Joy. Fortunately, new animators and animation companies are filling the creative void left by Disney.

The most notable company is Pixar. Although attached to Disney, it could not be any more different in its approach. When you watch something like Toy Story, you can actually notice the artists having fun. Watching a modern Disney film I personally get an unnerving sense that directors are trying to make a film palatable to a certain section of the public, not to amuse it. Pixar films, conversely, are beautifully made, contain actual wit in the dialogue and characters, and moreover, have a sense of humour. Disney are yet to realise that making a film according to market research just isn't funny.

Further afield, computer animation isn't the only aspect of the animating world that is sensing a change in the way feature length films are made. Despite the immense impact of Spirited Away, the French animation, Belleville Rendezvous, is also



Pixar- dominant as it is brilliant

exceptional. Involving virtually no dialogue and a characteristically French sense of slapstick, nothing could be further away from the contrived morality and sentimentality that has been present in Disney's ethos for years.

Hence, the diversity of the filmmaking world is making an immense impact upon Disney's monopoly on animation. Now, the innovative minds of a generation of animators are doing what they do best-enjoying their craft, so that we, the cinema going public can vicariously enjoy their efforts.

May Disney continue to fall.