



Madame Souza and her dog, Bruno.

Sly Genius

Cunning, eccentric characters.

THE TRIPLETS OF BELLEVILLE (France, 2003): Written and directed by Sylvain Chomet. Produced by Didier Brunner, Paul Cadieux. Direct animation, special effects and 3D compositing, Pieter Van Houte. Animation Supervisor, Jean-Christophe Lie. Music, Benoit Cherst. Production Design, Evgeni Tomov. Voices: Jean-Claude Donda, Michel Robin, Monica Viegas. Production Company, Les Armateurs. Sony Pictures Classics, 2003. PG-13. 80 minutes. Official 2003 selection at Cannes, Telluride and Toronto Film Festivals. 2003 Academy Award nominations: Best animated feature and original song.

If you've seen trailers or television ads for this highly-rated French film, you already know that it does not resemble a Pixar or Disney animated feature. The genius behind *The Triplets of Belleville* is writer, director Sylvain Chomet, whose whimsical take on perspective lends itself to the skewed architecture that looms over the bizarre figures, who populate the strange and wonderful story.

The film opens on a black-and-white musical revue set in Paris of the late 1930s as a trio of singing sisters croon into a microphone, followed by the outlandish dancer and singer Josephine Baker and Fred Astaire, who is savaged by his own tap shoes. Les Triplettes de Belleville anchor the program, singing the close melodies with the syncopated rhythms of the era.

And then, fuzzy, linear static commences, and the television screen goes dead in the bedroom of an old woman, Madame Souza, who lives with her grandson in a house about to fall in on them. The child, known as Champion, takes little interest in the piano his grandmother encourages him to play. Madame gets the boy a puppy, which makes both of them happy, and a tri-cycle that he rides around and around the small yard, while the pup chases his own tail in tiny circles.

Although the whole picture contains very few lines of dialogue that can be understood and no subtitles, the images and music are quite enchanting. And true to the fairy tale tradition, enchantment includes glimpses into the darkness. Only ambient sounds, sighs and grunts keep the film grounded in any kind of human reality.

I loved many things about this film, but Bruno the dog is a character close to my heart. I particularly love his black-and-white dreams of being hauled across a railway trestle on top of a train car. Bruno grows from an active pup into a dog of unknown breeding and indeterminate shape in the old woman's 1950s-era house, where he lopes up the stairs day and night when the train passes by an upstairs window. And there he sits, barking like mad at the blasé passengers. His great mass apparently boneless, Bruno slides down the stairs rather like a large blob of pudding, achieving a giddy headlong rush there at the end. When the dog and old woman stay at the home of the triplets in Belleville, Bruno performs the same job, barking away at intruders who ride the train past the window. I found the recurring sound of his bark familiar and reassuring.

Champion has also grown from a round boy to a dedicated cyclist with overdeveloped leg muscles and a face grown sharp-edged from riding into the wind. He has only one goal: to win the Tour de France. Madame Souza's whistle calls him back to that goal whenever his will falters.

The characters settle into the big city of Belleville aka New York City (the corpulent Statue of Liberty gives it away). Once the French mafia kidnappers who took Champion have been identified, the stage is set for a delirious chase scene. The city skyline includes a huge bottle of wine set atop a building, and fast cars round corners as brief messages flash from their bumpers. I read one that I thought said "In Vino Veritas." The way the pursued "car" rounds corners is a sight gag too slight to spoil here.

France takes its lumps in the film's satiric look at post-WWII icons such as Charles de Gaulle, while the U.S. seems to be populated solely by truly obese men, women and boy scouts. Uniformly excellent, *The Triplets of Belleville* opens Friday, Feb. 13 at the Bijou. Highest recommendations. **EW**

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***CATCH THAT KID** - PG (1:40) 3:50 6:00
***BARBERSHOP 2** - PG-13 (2:20) 4:50 7:10 9:35
BOOK OF MORMON MOVIE VOL 1: THE MOVIE - PG-13 3:40 8:30
PERFECT SCORE - PG-13 8:10
YOU GOT SERVED - PG-13 4:40 9:20
BUTTERFLY EFFECT - R (1:30) 4:20 7:00 9:30
ALONG CAME POLLY - PG-13 4:10 6:20
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11:35, 12:45, 12:55, 2:05, 3:25, 4:00, 4:45, 6:30, 7:05, 7:40, 9:05, 9:40, 10:25

LORD OF THE RINGS PG13
1:00, 5:15, 9:45

MONSTER R
11:00, 1:40, 4:25, 7:45, 10:30

BIG FISH PG13
12:30, 3:30, 7:20, 10:20

MIRACLE PG
11:25, 12:05, 2:40, 3:20, 6:25, 7:00, 9:35, 10:10

COLD MOUNTAIN R
11:15, 2:45, 6:45, 10:15

CATCH THAT KID PG
11:40, 2:10, 4:40, [7:40], 10:10

CHEAPER BY THE DOZEN PG
1:10, 7:00

BARBER SHOP 2 PG13
11:10, 1:50, 4:35, 7:45, 10:20

SOMETHING'S GOTTA GIVE* PG13
3:45, 10:15

PERFECT SCORE PG13
3:50, 9:40

MASTER AND COMMANDER* PG13
12:25, 6:50

YOU GOT SERVED PG13
11:30, 2:00, 4:30, 7:30, 10:05

BUTTERFLY EFFECT R
12:50, 3:40, 4:20, 7:10, 10:00

ALONG CAME POLLY PG13
12:00, 2:25, 5:05, 7:35, 10:00

MYSTIC RIVER R
11:50, 3:10, 6:55, 10:05

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[11:55], 2:20, 4:35, 6:55, 9:15

SCHOOL OF ROCK PG13
[11:25] 2:05, 4:40, 7:25, 10:00

CAT IN THE HAT PG
[12:05], 2:35, 4:45

STUCK ON YOU PG13
[11:30], 2:15, 5:00, 7:50, 10:35

ELF PG
[12:00], 2:25, 4:50, 7:20, 9:45

THE HAUNTED MANSION PG
[11:35], 2:00, 4:25, 6:50, 9:25

GOTHIKA R
[12:10], 2:40, 5:10, 7:40, 10:10

TIMELINE PG13
[11:20], 2:10, 4:55, 7:35, 10:20

LOVE ACTUALLY R
7:05, 10:05

UNDER THE TUSCAN SUN PG13
[11:45], 2:30, 5:05, 7:45, 10:25

LOVE DON'T COST A THING PG13
[11:30], 1:55, 4:20, 7:00, 9:30

MONA LISA SMILE PG13
[11:15], 2:00, 4:45, 7:30, 10:15

PETER PAN PG
[11:15], 1:50, 4:30, 7:10, 9:50

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