



Hellboy (Ron Perlman) and Liz (Selma Blair).

EGON ENDRENYI; COLUMBIA PICTURES, 2004.

## A Baby Ruth for Heroes

Of the supernatural kind.

**HELLBOY:** Written and directed by Guillermo del Toro. Based on the Dark Horse Comic created by Mike Mignola and a screen story by del Toro and Peter Briggs. Produced by Lawrence Gordon, Mike Richardson, Lloyd Levin. Executive producer, Patrick Palmer. Co-executive producer, Mike Mignola. Cinematography, Guillermo Navarro. Music, Marco Beltrami. Editor, Peter Amundson. Production design, Stephen Scott. Costumes, Wendy Partridge. Hellboy makeup consultant, Rick Baker. Starring Ron Perlman, with Selma Blair, Jeffrey Tambor, Karel Roden, John Hurt. Also Brian Steele, Doug Jones and Rupert Evans. Revolution Studios. Columbia Pictures, 2004. PG-13. 125 minutes.

The top-secret Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense has been called in to help with a delicate, late-WWII mission. BPRD's Professor Broom (John Hurt) is present when Allied soldiers break into a secret Nazi laboratory in the desert. Just as they enter the main cavern, Grigori Rasputin (Karel Roden) completes his experiment to bring to Earth a supernatural being who can be turned into an agent for Hitler's Apocalypse.

A firefight ensues, soldiers on both sides are killed, and Rasputin escapes. But as Professor Broom realizes, the mad Russian monk has left behind an immature but powerful, ruddy creature with both advanced paranormal gifts and a tail. Broom adopts him, and Hellboy (Ron Perlman) is raised to foster good and battle evil.

If you are already a *Hellboy* fan, none of this is news to you. But for those who don't know this particular comic book superhero, the opening sequence tells a great deal about what the rest of the film will reveal. First, there are good guys (Broom) and bad guys (Rasputin), with few crank characters in the middle. Second, Hellboy has potentially endearing characteristics that Perlman (*City of Lost Children*) can amplify without losing the resolve his tough exterior requires. Third, director Guillermo del Toro (*The Devil's Backbone*, *Blade II*) is an accomplished professional, who knows how to transform comic book fantasy into entertaining, lively, cinematic fare without losing its child-like charm.

I was hooked. Although fantasy comics are not my preferred reading material, I have liked a few such genre films, notably *Dick Tracy* and *Spider Man*, because both pictures contained human frailties and

humor. Likewise, *City of Lost Children* (1995), a dark, special-effects fantasy directed by Marc Caro and Jean-Pierre Jeunet (*Amelie*), had in its central story Perlman as a gentle giant and a young girl he teamed with to rescue a kidnapped child.

Del Toro's *Hellboy* opens in the present day, where the otherworldly creature has grown up to be a red giant in love with another paranormal, Liz Sherman (Selma Blair). Liz is a young woman locked into an intimate relationship with fire. My favorite para is the gentle telepath Abe Sapien (Doug Jones), who lives in an aquatic tank at Broom's laboratory. Abe reads emotions, rather like the female character on "Star Trek," but with a more developed sense of humor. Anxiety rules when Abe goes up against the latest Rasputin evil, Sammael (Brian Steele). Sammael, a lizard lookalike that Rasputin and his cohort Ilsa (Bridget Hodson) have loosed on Earth, simply regenerates as two of himself whenever he's killed.

It would be easy to get lost in the labyrinthine structure of the plot, yet del Toro has the magic touch with the story's demands. He maintains an even tone throughout while balancing the pace of the action with the needs of the characters to have some ordinary time. Hellboy gets beaten and bested but never loses his cool. He's confident that he will prevail, even against Sammael. Hellboy is more worried about an agent assigned to keeping him out of the daily newspapers, John Myers (Rupert Evans), who shows an interest in the enigmatic Liz. Hellboy keeps Myers in his sights, which is more effective than the other way around.

It seems ridiculous to talk about performances in a comic-book movie, but the film's success depends in part on the actors playing Hellboy and Liz, because they are so instrumental in the unfolding story. Perlman's mixture of sweetness and sardonic humor work well to keep Hellboy from caricature, despite his appearance. Blair shows Liz's desire to be normal, which makes her a sympathetic heroine.

Unlikely as it seems, I heartily recommend *Hellboy* for your viewing pleasure. It is an entertaining and surprisingly resonant, imaginative work. Now playing at Cinema World and Cineamark. **CW**

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