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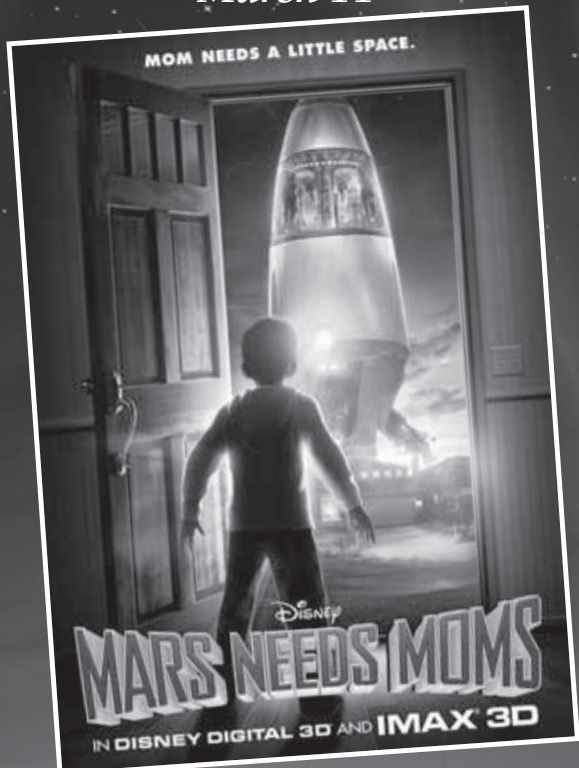
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The Good, the Bad and the Lazy

Rango wears its influences on its sleeve

RANGO: Directed by Gore Verbinski. Screenplay by John Logan. Story by Logan, Verbinski and James Ward Byrkit. Editor, Craig Wood. Music, Hans Zimmer. Starring the voices of Johnny Depp, Isla Fisher, Abigail Breslin, Ned Beatty, Timothy Olyphant and Alfred Molina. Paramount Pictures, 2011. 107 minutes. ★★☆☆

Rango starts out so well. Our bug-eyed, diminutive hero, an actor in a chameleon's body, has a creative streak as wide as his belly is round. In his aquarium world, the Johnny Depp-voiced chameleon — between moments of self-doubt — casts inanimate objects in theatrical productions. A fish, a plastic tree and a doll torso are poor castmates, but they'll do in a pinch. But the chameleon lacks an audience, at least until an accident lands him in the Mojave Desert, where a philosophical armadillo (Alfred Molina, one of the movie's highlights) gives him some spotty advice about "the other side." And one long, dusty walk later, he's in a dried-up desert town, regaling the thirsty, bedraggled locals with tall tales about his many exploits — tales that take on the ring of truth when the newly self-named Rango defeats a threat to the town.

In its more meta moments, *Rango* has a playful self-awareness that points to it being not exactly a kids' movie and, well, not exactly your average attempt at building a cash cow out of a cute character with a brand-name voice. But *Rango* plays with its hero's chameleonic nature without having more than the faintest awareness it's doing so.

In what could be a nifty twist on the tired "Be who you are and don't pretend to be someone you're not" theme, Rango tells a story about himself and then makes the story true. His story isn't so much self-discovery as self-creation, but in John Logan's overly referential screenplay, the idea of the chameleonic hero — adapting to a situation, telling a story that changes reality — is swiftly buried under a pile of too-knowing cinematic references (from *Chinatown* to *The Phantom Menace*, and with plenty of Westerns wedged in between) and stock characters built from cultural clichés. If the sultry French assistant and Native American tracker who speaks in broken sentences aren't enough for you, never fear: *Rango* will also provide an inbred family of thieves and a spunky lass who appears to be virtually the only female in the town of Dirt who's not either a child or dolled up like a prostitute.

Rango was clearly made by a team of crack animators and invented by at least one fellow (three men share story credit) with a clever idea and an occasionally wicked sense of humor. Depp is a kick, a handful of scenes are nearly breathtaking (credit Roger Deakins, the frequently Oscar-nominated cinematographer, who advised on the film) and Abigail Breslin makes the most of her dry, saucy mouse lass. The closing credits, which revisit sequences from the film in an entirely different style, are gorgeous.

The original elements of *Rango* work, but they're patched together with a thin and predictable thread of a story and finished with a tacked-on environmental message. When flashes of a whimsical, inventive spirit shine through (often in the film's darker moments), *Rango* picks up — and then slips, time and again, into an awkward middle ground between safe-stuff-for-kids and strange-stuff-for-adults. Maybe it's an odd thing to say about a Hunter S. Thompson-referencing, Johnny Depp-starring movie about an existentially troubled talking chameleon, but *Rango* really ought to be weirder.

EW

