



A BOY AND HIS (UNDEAD) DOG

Burton returns to full-Halloweenie form

FRANKENWEENIE: Directed by Tim Burton. Screenplay by John August, based on a story by Leonard Ripps, based on an idea by Tim Burton. Cinematography, Peter Sorg. Editors, Chris Lebenzon and Mark Solomon. Music, Danny Elfman. Starring the voices of Catherine O'Hara, Martin Short, Martin Landau, Winona Ryder and Charlie Tahan. Walt Disney Pictures, 2012. PG. 87 minutes. ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

If you've been thinking that maybe Tim Burton has slipped a little, you're hardly alone. This spring's *Dark Shadows* came and went, hardly a blip on the radar screen of pop culture, and 2010's *Alice in Wonderland* was such a murky muddle that even Johnny Depp and a plethora of talented actresses couldn't turn it into something watchable.

Frankenweenie, then, is a kind of comeback, and one that goes straight to Burton's roots: It's a full-length, stop-motion remake of the director's 1984 short of the same name. Clever, gloriously animated, dark but funny, loving but spooky, zippy but not too light — *Frankenweenie* is magically macabre, a more-than-worthy entry into a whole handful of movie categories: It's a boy and his dog movie, a creepy-delightful Halloweenish flick, a love song to monsters that aren't all that monstrous, and a story about a loner who isn't really alone.

Victor Frankenstein (Charlie Tahan), like seemingly everyone else in the small, timeless town of Dutch Hollow, has a weighty name and spindly little legs. A fan of movies

and science — rarely a popular combination — Victor spends much of his time alone, directing monster movies starring his beloved dog, Sparky, and making things in his attic laboratory. His dad (Martin Short) worries about Victor, and makes him a deal: Victor can participate in the science fair if he'll also try baseball. The weird girl in school tells Victor her cat dreamed about him (the evidence for this is gleefully grody), which means something big will happen, but the warning doesn't make the unexpected outcome of the baseball game — the loss of Sparky — any less of a shock.

Victor, bereft, turns to science to bring his friend back. His success has the requisite unintended consequences for the whole town, as competition for the science fair trophy takes a morbid turn. His classmates vie for the secret of reviving pets; his teacher, Mr. Rzykruski (Martin Landau), faces an angry populace that blames him for injuries caused by experimentation; Sparky, sewn together but cheerful as ever, gets just the kind of reception a reanimated corpse usually receives, cinematically.

Burton's film is referential, but never needlessly so; what he's referencing, whether he's nodding to monster movies or to his own previous work, is a long-running sympathy for the outsider — as well as a love of cinema and storytelling that makes *Frankenweenie* a black-clad cousin to shinier, gussied-up love-letter films like *Super 8* and *Hugo*. But Burton's source material is equal parts *Frankenstein*, *Old Yeller* and a boundless understanding for people who do crazy things out of love. As Mr. Rzykruski notes, it's only when the variables change — when Victor's classmates tried to outwit him for the sake of greed and competition — that things go awry. *Frankenweenie*, which made me cry almost as much as the audibly sobbing kids in the theater, is a big-hearted optimist's tale beautifully warped through Burton's trademark twisted vision. He'll earn the adoration of another generation with this one, and he deserves it. ■

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