

OZ THE DULL AND TERRIBLE

Sam Raimi's *Oz* is a missed opportunity, and no amount of glittering CGI can save it

OZ THE GREAT AND POWERFUL: Directed by Sam Raimi. Screenplay by Mitchell Kapner and David Lindsay-Abaire. Cinematography, Peter Deming. Editor, Bob Murawski. Music, Danny Elfman. Starring James Franco, Mila Kunis, Rachel Weisz, Michelle Williams, Zach Braff and Joey King. Disney, 2013. PG. 130 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

Once upon a time, I was an Oz purist. Not for the 1939 movie, though I liked it well enough, but for L. Frank Baum's books, which I read until they were ragged. The first time I saw the cover of *Wicked*, Gregory Maguire's novel about the Wicked Witch of the West, I stopped dead, thinking: One does not do that to Oz.

In fact, one does do that to Oz, if by "that" you mean envision the witch as Maguire does, as a singular, conflicted, astonishing creature. What one really does not do to Oz is transform it into the insipid, insulting *Oz the Great and Powerful*.

To figure out just what went so terribly awry with Sam Raimi's new film, start with producer Joe Roth, so proudly billed as the producer of Tim Burton's limp *Alice in Wonderland*. Roth's list of credits also includes *Snow White and the Huntsman*, which reworked the central stepmother/daughter, beauty/age conflict in order to let the Huntsman share top billing.



Roth and Raimi's screenwriters, Mitchell Kapner and David Lindsay-Abaire, work a similar retro spell here. This isn't the Oz you remember, where a young girl uncovers a wizard's charade and finds her way home with the help of a powerful witch. This is the Oz of men who thought today's cinematic landscape was lacking male leads.

And thus, our reluctant hero is Oscar Diggs (a tiresome James Franco), the con man known as Oz, who dreams of being a great man like Thomas Edison. Oz doesn't do much work toward that dream; mostly he uses his tricks to earn a few coins — and the affections of various women. On the run from an angry strongman, Oz is picked up by a twister that deposits him on the far side of the Technicolor rainbow, in a land where the only magic is of the green-screen sort.

It turns out Oz has been waiting for him, thanks to a prophesy from the land's last king (only men rule here; sorry, Ozma!). "Are you the great man we've been waiting for?" asks sweet witch Theodora (Mila Kunis) breathlessly. Theodora's sister, Evanora (Rachel Weisz), is more skeptical, and requires that the wizard prove himself,

while Glinda (Michelle Williams) puts her considerable skills to use convincing Oz that he's just what her people need, if he'll just believe in himself.

For a very brief time, I imagined *Oz* was taking the piss, telling a sly cautionary tale about the dangers of teaching women to wait around for men to save them. No such luck. *Oz the Great and Powerful* transforms the bones of L. Frank Baum's feminist fairytales into a slog of a story about the redemption of a smug, dull con man; the ugly wrath of a woman scorned; and the terrible things that will happen if you are female, angry, old and/or brunette.

There are brilliant, vibrant Oz stories that have yet to be told on film — the ones featuring Ozma, Dorothy and General Jinjur, to name a few. But those have girls in them — independent, plucky, spirited girls who will just go out and save the day themselves. The argument's been made that the witches still have the power in Raimi's *Oz*, but that's not the point; the point is that they use it doing nothing but propping up a cad with a soft spot for delicate blondes. Predictable, burdened with unfunny dialogue and stilted performances, and insulting to its audience and its source material, this *Oz* is anything but great. ■

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