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Film reviews: The Lorax | The King of Devil's Island | The Fairy | Strawberry Fields | Searching for Sugar Man



The Fairy

Published on **Thursday 26 July 2012 02:00**

ALISTAIR HARKNESS gives his verdict on this week's big screen releases

The Lorax (U)

Directed by: Chris Renaud, Kyle Balda

Voices: Zac Efron, Taylor [Swift](#), Danny DeVito, Ed Helms, Betty White

Rating: **

ANOTHER delightfully succinct Dr Seuss tale is mercilessly padded out for the big screen in this underpowered, animated eco-parable. Danny DeVito voices the titular Lorax, the furry little critter whose position as the spokesman for the trees has been diminished thanks to corporate greed wiping out all the greenery surrounding the city of Thneedsville.

His role in the film is pretty diminished too, as Despicable Me director Chris Renaud (co-directing with Kyle Balda) focuses instead on the young kid called Ted (voiced by Zac Efron) who sets out to find a real tree to impress the kooky girl next door (Taylor Swift) who is sick of living in an artificial city full of plastic and manufactured air. Ted's quest brings him into contact with the Once-ler (Ed Helms) a one-time entrepreneur whose [determination](#) to succeed at any cost is the reason that nature is a thing of the past. His story is told in parallel with Ted's as a way of hammering home an otherwise worthy environmental message about the value of learning young to live a life that's in balance with the planet. But it all feels rather secondary to the principal aim of simply getting families to pay premium prices for shonky 3D animation.

The King of Devil's Island (15)

Directed by: Marius Holst

Starring: Benjamin Helstad, Kristoffer Joner, Stellan Skarsgård

Rating: ***

SOLID acting and chilly, oppressive visuals save this rather rote borstal drama from being just another grim, unenlightening exploration of incarceration. Based on a true story, the film is set on Bastøy, an island off the coast of Norway that served as a self-contained reformatory school for maladjusted boys during the early part of the 20th century. The film's titular "king" is Erling (Benjamin Helstad), the new kid on the cell block who has been sent there after narrowly avoiding being imprisoned for murder. An illiterate teenage sailor with a propensity to make metaphor-laden observations about the natural order of the world, he's seeking an escape route from the moment he arrives, and gradually begins to [inspire](#) a rebellious spirit among his fellow teenage inmates, who have long been cowed by the seeming hopelessness of their situation. Plot-wise, it's all very reminiscent of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, although as the conflicted, God-fearing warden, Stellan Skarsgård provides plenty of shading as a man who torn between his principles and the demands of his job.

The Fairy (PG)

Directed by: Dominique Abel, Finna Gordon, Bruno Romy

Starring: Dominique Abel, Fiona Gordon, Bruno Romy

Rating: **

HAVING served as the eponymous setting for Aki Kaurismäki's most recent slice of deadpan whimsy, the Belgian port town of Le Havre is in danger of suffering a serious quirk overload courtesy of The Fairy. Made by the same team of physical theatre-loving oddballs responsible for the delectable Rumba a few years ago, it revolves around Dom (Dominique Abel), a hotel receptionist who becomes embroiled in a series of misadventures after being granted three wishes by a hotel guest claiming to be a fairy (Fiona Gordon). Largely plotless, the film serves up a series of droll, slapstick set-pieces, your enjoyment of which will largely be determined by how adorable you find the prospect of watching a couple of kooks dancing at the bottom of the sea amid giant oysters and jellyfish. Minor efforts are made to connect events to the real world courtesy of a skit in which a [trio](#) of young African men are trying to escape across the Channel to Britain, but while in small doses some of the The Fairy is adorable – an early gag involving a hotel guest attempting to smuggle his pooch into the no-pets-allowed hotel is a wondrous little visual gag – collectively it grates rather than elates.

Strawberry Fields (15)

Directed by: Francis Lea

Starring: Anna Madeley, Christine Bottomley, Emun Elliott

Rating: **

TAKING on a more literal and mundane meaning than one might expect from a title so closely associated with The Beatles, Strawberry Fields serves up a strange but unconvincing love triangle set in the world of seasonal fruit pickers. Anna Madeley and Christine Bottomley play Gillian and Emily, sisters with a fractious relationship that comes to a head when the former impulsively takes a job on a strawberry farm in rural Kent to escape the latter. Quickly bonding with Kev (Emun Elliott), a single father running away from his own responsibilities, Gillian finds herself inventing a whole other life for herself, one that comes crashing down when the manic Emily tracks her down and moves in on Kev in an attempt to prevent her sister from leaving her on her own. That's not a bad premise, but first-time director and co-writer Francis Lea never makes it feel particularly believable. Emily's neediness is schematically rendered (one minute she's all sweetness and light, the next she's a raging nut-job), Gillian is a sensitive and kooky dullard and Kev is fairly hapless object of lust given the high-pitched melodrama it's working towards.

Searching for Sugar Man (12A)

Directed by: Malik Bendjelloul

Rating: ****

IF YOU'VE never heard of the American folk artist Rodriguez whose legend this intriguing documentary sets out to explore, don't worry: that's the point. Nobody's ever really heard of him. Discovered in a dingy Detroit folk club in the late 1960s by a pair of enterprising producers who thought they might have the next Bob Dylan on their hands, this mysterious troubadour released two flop albums before disappearing from the public eye. And there he might have remained, had a twist of fate not resulted in his music finding its way to South Africa where, in the 1970s and 1980s, it became soundtrack for a generation of middle [class](#) Afrikaners who took to the streets to protest Apartheid. With limited pop-culture awareness, these fans just assumed Rodriguez was as big in the rest of the world as he was in South Africa and this, combined with an absence of information about the man behind the music, resulted in rumours that he'd committed suicide on stage. The film picks up the quest of two fans as they set out to find out how he really died. What they unearth is a bizarre story, one that is more mundane than the legend but also more magical and enduring.

ALISTAIR HARKNESS

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