

Films from Sally Potter and Tim Burton: thin and wearing thin

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Yes, written and directed by Sally Potter; *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, directed by Tim Burton, written by John August, based on the book by Roald Dahl

British filmmaker Sally Potter (*Orlando*, *The Man Who Cried*) conceived of her latest movie, *Yes*, in response to the post-9/11 mistreatment of people of Middle Eastern descent. “I started writing *Yes* in the days following the attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York City. I felt an urgent need to respond to the rapid demonization of the Arabic world in the West and to the parallel wave of hatred against America,” states Potter in an interview. The film’s premise is worthy and stands out as unusual in today’s cinema. Unfortunately, despite Potter’s good intentions, the project suffers severely from its own internal contradictions. The film follows the love affair in London of a Lebanese immigrant (Simon Abkarian) and an Irish/American microbiologist (Joan Allen). The former is a surgeon who has fled Beirut and now works as a menial laborer in a hotel; the latter is trapped in a failing marriage to an adulterous British politician (Sam Neill). To underscore the “universality” of the movie’s theme, Potter has named her two leads, He and She.

Along the way, the film also attempts to deal with questions of class, death, love, fidelity, atheism, feminism, Islamicism, the supposed failure of communism and the character of the Cuban state, not necessarily in that order. Loading up the plate even further, the actors are corseted by a script primarily written in pseudo-Shakespearean iambic pentameter and a plotline that is rigidly schematic.

In launching her story, Potter generates lead characters from two conflict zones—Beirut and Belfast. Mechanically reducing all relationships to simple equations, the filmmaker contrasts repressed Anglo-Saxons with hot-blooded, passionate Middle Easterners; the astute, all-seeing poor with the self-deluded wealthy, and so forth. Character development and emotional life, already subordinated to Potter’s political recipes, are further hamstrung by the script’s language.

Explaining her rationale for composing the script in verse,

for the most part a silly endeavor, Potter muses: “Well, I read somewhere that in times of war the sales of poetry books go up. It’s as though we need to use our most clear and rich tool, which is the tool of language, to express the subtleties and the nuances of our experience. And I think that verse is a kind of structure that allows us to explore language in a more interesting, more heightened way, than we tend to in everyday conversation.” Her reasoning, however, is more poetic than her screenplay.

The servants peppered throughout the film function as an ersatz Greek chorus bringing attention to the hidden army who clean up after the rich. In the opening prologue, She’s chambermaid talks to the camera at great length: “No rights to speak of, just a basic role / To play in keeping their lives looking good. / Cosmetic artists. That is what we should / Be called. Or...dirt consultants.”

The ethnic divide between the main characters is immortalized in dialogue, such as: He: “And the queen of all, the tree that reaches / For the sun to fill its seed with gold: / The yellow fruit, the apricot...”

She replies: “Potato is our apricot. We bake / We boil, we mash, we fry; and then we make / A flour of it for dumplings in our stew / Or bread or scones or pancakes.../ The famine haunts us still, you see.” To be kind, Potter’s aim of presenting cultural differences as superficial barriers falls victim to the film’s intrusive mannerisms.

Plot coherence and logic are also sacrificed to Potter’s linguistic and ideological constraints. He, the character, loses his job after a violent encounter with his fellow kitchen workers—a trio of so-called political types that include a Jesus-spouting Afro-Caribbean, a somewhat neutral Scottish worker and a xenophobic British youth. Devastated and humiliated by the loss of a dime-a-dozen job, He is transformed instantaneously from an enlightened secularist to a chauvinist zealot invoking ancestral admonitions against women. (One wonders why a physician would have so much emotionally invested in a dead-end job when it is not clear that he is in desperate financial straits.) He accuses She of imperialism: “You want to rule, you want to spoil; / You

want our land, you want out oil.../ Your country is a dragon, breathing flames; / Land of corporate fantasies, brand names..." She replies to He by dubbing him a terrorist!

One of the film's most hard-to-take moments is the scene in which She's dying Irish/atheist grandmother in Belfast delivers a voice-over monologue as she is passing over to the other side. Everything and the kitchen sink are thrown into the setting, which functions primarily as an opportunity for the filmmaker to expound upon extraneous tidbits about life and death—and socialist revolution. "A great big dream that has fallen pretty flat / In all the other [besides Cuba] where they tried / It. They'll regret it. Communism died, / But what came in its place? A load of greed. / A life spent longing for things you don't need," are some of the thoughts that the grandmother silently transmits to She.

The film's last inexplicable twist features She sitting in Havana making a turn to religion: "...I've sung the song / Of science. Yes, I've sung it every day...Oh God...can you forgive me / For not—for not believing in you?"

Cuba, opines Potter mistakenly, represents "the last outpost of the communist dream: somewhere on earth where people are put before profit, where the economic system is not based on greed but on a principle of equality." One wonders if the director has had anything more than a cursory and distant love affair with the country. Her rose-colored view of the Castro regime is typical of a particular social milieu. Placing their eggs in the Cuban basket helps prevent people like Potter from looking critically at their own society and absolves them of certain artistic and social responsibilities. Her approach to the Cuban question is characteristic of the film's essentially hollow and misguided (and often silly) radicalism.

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory by American filmmaker Tim Burton is based on the 1964 novel by Roald Dahl and concerns an eccentric candy-maker, Willie Wonka, who invites five children and their guardians to tour his mysterious factory. The children are chosen by way of golden tickets hidden in globally distributed candy bars. The least intolerable child will be awarded a "special prize" at the visit's end.

Competitors include the gluttonous Augustus Gloop; the insufferably spoiled rich kid, Veruca Salt; the gum-chewing, competition-driven Violet Beauregarde; and the violent, video-game addict, Mike Teavee. The saintly Charlie Bucket (Freddie Highmore), who lives in a Dickensian set-up with his parents and grandparents, will be the obvious choice for the Wonka (Johnny Depp) award.

Also featured are the Oompa-Loompans, a race of diminutive people that Wonka rescued from an environmentally hostile location. They man the factory and function as the chorus line of doom for the undeserving

contestants.

Deep's character combines amorphous asexuality with a pinch of sadism. The key to understanding the chocolate genius's oddity is his childhood. As the son of a strict dentist (Christopher Lee), Willy was forbidden to eat candy and forced to wear an orthodontic retainer that cruelly caged his head (perhaps the source of Wonka's frozen expression and slightly buck teeth). In the end, all foibles are overcome: Wonka reconciles with the concept of family, lifting Charlie and his loved ones out of their poverty. Father Wonka, DDS, is rescued from his self-imposed isolation.

Burton's film is a visual cornucopia, heightened by Danny Elfman's multifaceted musical score. Working simultaneously on a number of levels, the movie is a sophisticated fantasy extending its reach from child to adult.

Bittersweet comic moments center on the just punishment meted out to obnoxious children. These are cleverly punctuated by musical numbers with a moral message performed by the Oompa-Loompans (actor Deep Roy, digitally multiplied 165 times). The movie, however, tends to be crammed and overburdened, forcing Depp to work double-time to lighten the load.

Charlie once again bears Burton's pet theme that imagination is the cure-all for a stultifying and soul-crushing world. As important and justified as this message may be, it becomes increasingly threadbare as Burton continues mounting bigger and more intricate extravaganzas. While largely ignoring the state of society, the filmmaker stays focused on his particular bugaboos. When Charlie asks what Willy has against family, the latter replies: "It's not just your family. It's the whole idea of...you know, they're always telling you what to do and what not to do and it's not conducive to a creative atmosphere."

Burton's credo is best expressed when the Oompa Loompans do a song-and-dance routine, while philosophizing that "the most important thing that we've ever learned / The most important thing we've learned as far as children are concerned / Is never, never let them near a television set, or better still just don't install the idiotic thing at all."

Unaccompanied by any insight into the conditions that have made the current cultural malaise possible, the message becomes a bit stale.



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