

HOLLYWOOD NEEDS MORE MAGIC – THE NARNIA, NOT THE POTTER KIND

By Don Feder

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In “The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe,” the lion, Aslan, speaks of the “deep magic from the dawn of time” which governs magical Narnia.

At the outset, let me say: A) This isn’t a movie review, B) I loved the movie, and C) I won’t get into the controversy about whether director Andrew Adamson eviscerated the book’s underlying Christian message.

“Narnia” is about magic – but not in a superficial sense. With notable exceptions, magic is what’s missing in modern cinema. It’s also what makes movies more than mere entertainment -- that which moves us in *moving* pictures.

This won’t be the usual lament about Hollywood losing its way. Why state the obvious?

I mean, look, they’re making movies based on comic books and video games. So much of what disgraces the big screen today is empty spectacle – sumptuous sets, computer-generated action sequences, psychotic killers posing as heroes, revenge tales masquerading as morality plays, erotic attraction passing for love, and celebrations of sensuality, narcissism and nihilism.

What’s needed is more magic – real magic. By that I don’t mean English schoolboys waving wands, blood-sucking monsters or the demonic possession of pre-pubescent girls.

Magic enchants us. Magic thrills us. Magic inspires us. Deep magic points to the deeper meaning in life.

Magical movies leave us satisfied, but also with a sense of longing – a longing to be more than we are, a longing to be what we dare to hope we could be. Movie magic points to a higher magic – toward the ultimate source of magic, mystery, wonderment and truth.

“The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe,” is magical – not just because of the fauns, centaurs, talking animals and diabolical sorceress. Rather, the picture’s radiance lies in its depiction of devotion, sacrifice, overcoming resentment and finding resolve.

This adaptation of the beloved C.S. Lewis children’s book tells us that magic is everywhere, lurking just below the surface of the mundane. The musty wardrobe filled with fur coats in reality is a doorway to another world.

Magic teaches. Oldest sister Susan – the practical, logical one – learns to have faith, to think with her heart. Loveable Lucy leads the way; for her, believing is easy, and, through her eyes, we learn to believe too.

“Narnia” reminds me of another magical movie, Peter Jackson’s adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien’s “Lord of The Rings: The Return of the King,” best picture of 2004.

Tolkien and Lewis were colleagues and friends, both Oxford dons who used fairy tales to get at more profound matters.

. It was arch-Catholic Tolkien who brought Ulster Protestant Lewis back to Christianity, after a youthful bout of agnosticism. If not for Tolkien’s persuasion, there would have been no “Narnia” novels or Screwtape Letters.

“The Lord of The Rings” offers an awe-inspiring vision. The struggle of good and evil is played out against a backdrop of a magic ring that tempts and corrupts, wizards (benevolent or malevolent), elves, orcs, heroic Halflings, a broken sword re-forged and a wanderer who becomes king.

As in “Narnia,” the real magic lies in loyalty, faith and love.

Tolkien and Lewis were of a mind here. The former once wrote. “There is no better medium for moral teaching than the good Fairy-story (by which I mean a real deep-rooted tale, told as a tale, and not a thinly disguised moral allegory).”

Said Lewis: “In making a myth, and peopling the world with elves, dragons and goblins, a story-teller is actually fulfilling God’s purpose and reflecting a splintered fragment of the true light.”

Magical movies don’t have to be about imaginary realms. My favorite movie of 2005 (just released on DVD) is “Cinderella Man.” That’s what Damon Runyon called fighter James J. Braddock, whose Depression-era comeback seemed the stuff of glass slippers and pumpkin coaches.

Here the magic is a love of family that inspires an over-the-hill boxer to climb back into the ring, take pulverizing body blows, risk death and overcome exhaustion, pain and derision. (In the film, his trainer says that Braddock, preparing for the championship bout, is “old, arthritic and has broken ribs that haven’t healed.”) Move over Aragon!

Magic? As Jimmy Stewart says to Kim Novak at the end of “Bell, Book and Candle.” “Who’s to say what magic is?”

All magical roads lead back to the one made of yellow brick and a girl from Kansas who took a ride in a cyclone back in 1939. In “The Wizard of Oz,” we learn about the real meaning of wisdom, love and courage – and, of course, there’s no place like home.

From the White Witch who fancied herself a queen to the Wicked Witch who coveted the Ruby Slippers, from Glinda to Aslan, from Munchkins to centaurs, from Oz to Narnia, the story never ends. As Bilbo the Hobbit said, each story is part of another story -- and all move us in the same direction.

Inevitably, magic is about overcoming the proverbial impossible odds. It’s about finding or keeping the faith that guides us through our darkest hour. It’s about love. It’s about God from whom all magic flows.

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