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'Fisher King' combines comedy, tragedy

By Kevin Robinson
The Battalion

The Fisher King
Starring: Robin Williams, Jeff Bridges, Mercedes Ruehl, and Amanda Plummer
Directed by Terry Gilliam

Movie Review

In "The Fisher King," director Terry Gilliam manages two minor miracles. The first is in creating a film that so perfectly combines comedy and tragic drama. Without the comedy relief, the movie's emotionally intense plot would make for a most depressing and cynical movie. Without the benefit of the drama, the movie would lose most of its power and underlying meaning.

The second miracle is that Gilliam and Robin Williams, kings of excess and improvisation, can actually work on the same film and have something coherent come out of the experience.

"The Fisher King" is much more than just coherent. The film allows both Gilliam and Williams their moments of eccentricity, but the movie remains tight. Running about 140 minutes, "The Fisher King" never slows its pace, keeping the film emotionally charged and moving through its entire length.

Jeff Bridges portrays Jack Lucas, a New York shock radio host on the verge of superstardom. The arrogant Lucas is about to embark on a profitable film and television career when a flippant on-air remark leads a disturbed listener to gun down several customers at a local trendy restaurant. As he listens to the news report, Lucas realizes his career is over.

The film then fast-forwards three years. Jack is now working for a chintzy video store owned by his new girlfriend, Anne (Mercedes Ruehl). Despite her constant affection, Lucas

feels as if his life is going nowhere. In a drunken stupor one night, he is mistaken as homeless by two young men who douse him with gasoline and attempt to set him on fire.

Jack is saved from this scene by the mysterious Parry (Robin Williams), a Robin Hood type figure who leads a vigilante group of homeless men. Parry lives in a medieval fantasy land, imagining himself and his companions as knights, righting wrongs in the inner city. Parry tells Jack of his two quests.

The first is for the Holy Grail, which he believes to be kept in a billionaire's castle-like mansion. The second is his romantic obsession with the reclusive Lydia (Amanda Plummer), a woman that Parry sees as his romantic destiny. Taking pity on his rescuer, Jack agrees to help him win the affections of Lydia, if not the Grail.

The true story of Parry gradually comes to light. He was at one time a medieval history professor, until his wife suffered an extremely violent death. This caused Parry to retreat into his own world of medieval history and mythology. In this mental fantasy land, Parry personifies his pain in the form of the satanic Red Knight who terrorizes him constantly.

Through the help of Jack, Parry meets Lydia and begins to fear less the visitations of the Red Knight. Helping Parry, Jack finds the self confidence to allow him to repair his career.

Events progress happily until the evening that the vision of the Red Knight is accompanied by two men that beat Parry into a coma. In the meantime, Jack regains his old job and returns to his former elitist, uncaring attitude. Though trying to distance himself from his former street life, which he now finds repulsive, it's now Lucas' moral decision whether to attempt to find the supposed Grail, the only way that Parry might be helped.

Though in the past, Terry Gilliam has been associated with directing extravagant special effects epics ("Time Bandits," "Brazil" and "The Adventures of Baron Munchausen"), his directing is remarkably subdued in this picture. It's still definitely a Gilliam picture, though, with weird, distorted angles, a demon-

ic Red Knight, and the bizarre visual humor that Gilliam picked up from his days with British comedy legends, Monty Python. However, the fabulous script of Richard LaGravenese keeps the entire picture down to earth and concentrates on character development, not visual spectacle.

LaGravenese's script also keeps tight focus on the manic Williams. Gilliam allows Williams a few moments that were obviously improvised, including an incredible scene in which Anne first meets the eccentric Parry. Williams is a master of improvising, but keeps it to a minimum in this film, breaking out into his comedy routine only at the right moment.

In movies such as "Dead Poet Society" and "Awakenings," Williams has proved that he is a very capable actor without his trademark mania. With "The Fisher King," Williams adds one more success to his record.

In actuality, the entire main cast is very good. Jeff Bridges has rarely been better, portraying a character that realistically reverses back to his selfish personality when opportunity strikes. In an era of movies such as "The Doctor," it's refreshing to see a character that doesn't change his personality as often as he does his clothes.

Ruehl as Anne and Plummer as Lydia also deserve much credit. Ruehl is great as the streetwise yet sensitive working woman. Plummer is perfect as the klutzy Lydia, occasionally even stealing the scene from Robin Williams. Both women are given backing roles, but they remain just as dominant as the two male stars in every scene they're in.

"The Fisher King" isn't just a fantasy excursion, nor is it another male buddy film. It's a movie about the way four people deal with guilt and pain in their lives. There is comedy, and some scenes are hilarious, but those expecting a light escapist picture will be overwhelmed. In "The Fisher King," the audience encounters a brutal world of violence and cynicism, and if the picture also makes them laugh it's because they need the medieval escape as much as Parry does.

Video Reviews

'The Doors' focuses on Morrison, not on band

By Timm Doolen
The Battalion

"The Doors"
Directed by Oliver Stone
Rated R

Oliver Stone's "The Doors" is an interesting but occasionally flawed case study of a rock icon, Jim Morrison, the creative force behind The Doors.

In the late '60s, The Doors laid down some of the most poetic and driving songs to come out of the '60s psychedelic era. While Stone captures the mystique that surrounded The Doors (helped by a wonderful performance by Val Kilmer as Jim Morrison), he almost captures too much of it.

Don't get me wrong — I enjoyed this film quite a bit, especially the music, but I don't think the topic of the troubled soul of Jim Morrison could be properly treated in two hours and 20 minutes. Also, the conversion from the big screen to video hurts the illusion of some of the psychedelic effects.

In the film Morrison is turned into a mystical demi-god, not a rock and roll hero. Instead of seeing the roots of The Doors' music or his

inner drives, we see the glorified Morrison.

Stone shows us how crazy this guy was and how he was so obsessed by death, but we never really find out why he is like this; we never get inside Morrison's head. We see him drink his own blood from a chalice, but are never shown his deeper motivations for wanting to do this.

The only explanation we get is a wreck Morrison witnessed as a child, which causes him to see ghost Indians all the time. After about the 30th Indian, it got old.

This film should not have been called "The Doors," but rather "Jim Morrison" because there is nothing about any of the band members except the lead singer. Admittedly there could not have been The Doors without Morrison, but then again there probably could not have been The Doors without the other three musicians either. Virtually no time was given to Robby Krieger, Ray Manzarek or John Densmore.

Those who have a personal affection for the work of The Doors will enjoy the movie. But I doubt this would have any meaning to anyone who was not a Doors fan except as to show one man's slow destruction.

'Lenny' tells story of slow self-destruction

"Lenny"
Directed by Bob Fosse
Rated R

A man with troubles similar to those of Jim Morrison was Lenny Bruce, who is wonderfully depicted in Bob Fosse's "Lenny" (1974).

Dustin Hoffman becomes Bruce, a man who, like Morrison, was his own worst enemy, and this eventually led to a young death.

In Lenny's monologues, he jokes about the problems in his life, including his marriage, drug and alcohol and five arrests for obscenity while on stage.

But whereas Morrison let life take hold of him, Bruce met it head on. After being arrested for obscenity charges, he took it upon himself to learn the laws regarding the First Amendment.

Bob Fosse has a striking visual style (the movie is shot in black-and-white), but the whole movie is carried by Hoffman's acting and a good supporting role by Valerie Perrine as Bruce's wife.

T. D.

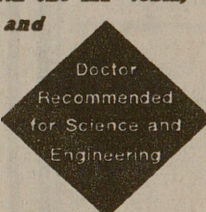
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