Classic comic strip movie is visual delight

By Oliver Spivey
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I was pumped about seeing Dick Tracy (1990). I may have been the only kid in the theater sporting the shirt and carrying one of a kind Dick Tracy fan-boy, I suppose. Watching it almost 20 years later, I noticed that there is still a lot for a kid to admire—and a lot for a lover of great cinema.

Warren Beatty, who directs and stars in the film, captures the essence of the classic comic strip created by Chester Gould, while paying homage to both the Hollywood gangster film and the lavish Technicolor spectacles of the golden age.

The film’s plot is . . . well, you guessed it, as simple as one from a comic strip. The story is held together by a string of clichés and the characters are exaggerated archetypes; but that, as critics who dismissed the film upon its release—and there were more than a few—a complaint of the one-dimensional characters, but Beatty intended for the characters to be firmly fixed in the comic universe from which they came.

Tracy is literally the square-jawed hero, and the thugs—Flattop, Itchy, Square-jawed hero, and there were more than a few—all other gangs with his own and establishes a lucrative business of corruption. The only thing in this way is the incorruptible crime fighter, Dick Tracy.

With such a predictable, though undeniably entertaining storyline, the real joy of the film lies in its wonderful production values. Beatty makes sure that his film’s palette is saturated with primary colors: cars, buildings, clothing, furniture and even lampposts burst forth in vibrant reds, greens, blues, purples, yellows and oranges.

Vittorio Storaro’s cinematography riffs the film’s colorful splendor in our faces with arresting compositions. The film’s intentionally artificial look is heightened by a terrific set design that uses classical movie making techniques.

Daniele Elfmart’s boldly cinematic score is unforgettable, especially when it was experienced in theaters back in 1990; it was the first film to use digital sound.

Stephen Sondheim’s original songs are a treat, one of them winning an Oscar, and lend to the film’s period authenticity. Some viewers can’t stand Madonna as Breathless Mahoney in the movie, but I remain somewhat indifferent. She’s sufficient but not great, though her blatant attempt to look like Marilyn Monroe is amusing and obvious. Beatty is suitably stoic as Tracy and the rest of the supporting cast is a dream. Classic movie buffs will want to keep an eye out for actors like Dick Van Dyke, James Caan, R.G. Armstrong, Henry Silva, Dustin Hoffman and prolific character actor Ian Wolfe in his last screen role. In recent years there have been some exceptional movie adaptations of comics and graphic novels with tremendous visual flare, like the hyper-noir Sin City (2005) and last spring’s unique superhero epic, Watchmen. A less satisfying one, the highly popular 300 (2006), is a great looking film no doubt, but unfortunately becomes a mindless slaughter-fest and nothing more.

Maybe it’s the 6-year-old kid in me still riveted in that dark theater, or maybe the classic movie geek, but Dick Tracy achieves all the fetching wonder and stylized violence of those films without the convenient use of CGI or the beyond excessive bloodletting. Truly a movie that is—please don’t laugh—old-fashioned fun for the whole family.

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