

Films Fantastic

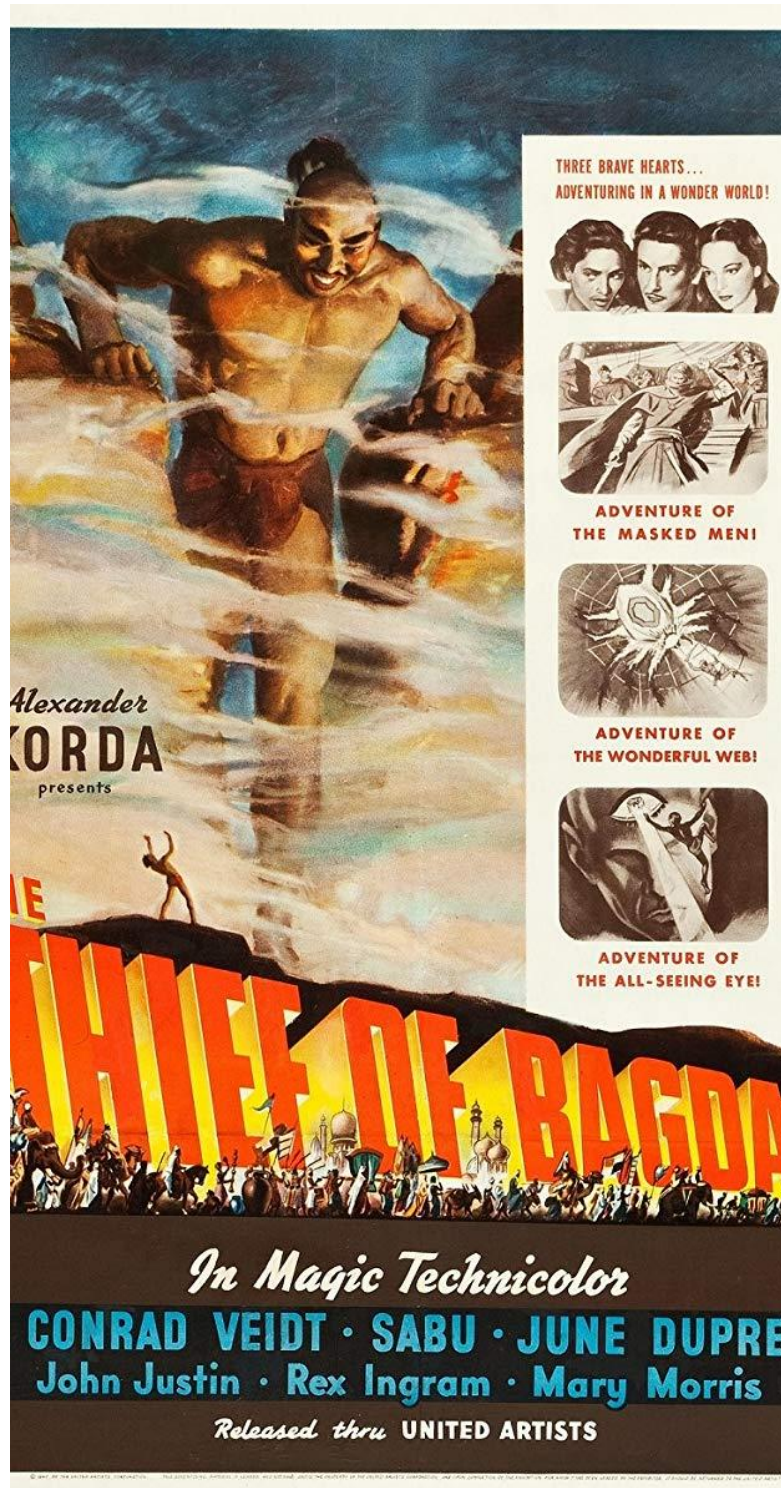
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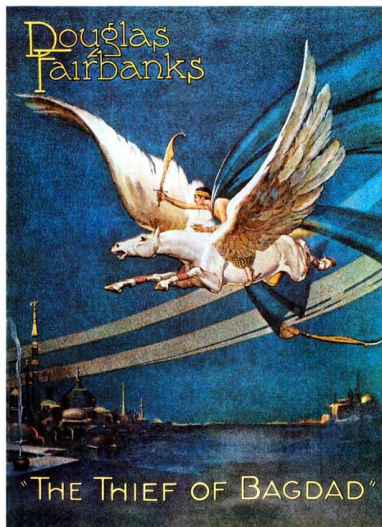
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Fantasy has been a popular subject since the earliest days of films as evidenced by the delightful, and sometimes frightening, films of Georges Melies. As feature films became more popular more Fantastic subjects were filmed. This



remains true today although the line is sometimes very thin between genres at times. One of the best Fantasy films was THE THIEF OF BAGDAD produced by Alexander Korda.

Korda's was the second film of this title, the first having been filmed in 1924 by Douglas Fairbanks, the greatest swashbuckler of the silent screen. Korda, in turn, bought the rights to the title from Fairbanks, but commissioned a new story to feature his young Indian star Sabu after his successes in ELEPHANT BOY and THE DRUM. Sabu would portray the young thief Abu. (Pay attention. A number of character names will show up in Disney's ALADDIN a few decades later.)



To provide the proper villainy Korda hired Conrad Veidt, an expatriate who had fled Hitler's Germany. He was famous for portraying the Somnambulist in THE CABINET OF DR CALIGARI (1919), PEER GYNT, Satan at least twice, Rasputin, Ivan the Terrible in the silent Horror film WAXWORKS, and starred in the German Science Fiction film (English language version) F. P. 1 DOES NOT REPLY. Among general film buffs he is probably most remembered as Major Strasser in CASABLANCA.

June Duprez portrayed the Princess of Basra and Miles Malleon (who also wrote the script) was her father, the Sultan. John Justin portrayed Ahmad, the deposed Caliph of Bagdad. Perhaps most outstanding, in more ways than one, was American actor Rex Ingram as the Djinn. Ingram had earlier portrayed "De Lawd" in GREEN PASTURES and Satan, Jr in CABIN IN THE SKY.

The story is relatively simple. Jaffar, the Grand Vizir, overthrows the Caliph and throws him into prison to await execution. In the prison Ahmad meets Abu, the young thief, who steals the keys from the guard and effects their escape. Stealing a boat they sail downriver toward the sea, landing at Basra. Here Ahmad sees the Princess and falls in love. He later meets her in the palace garden and she falls in love with him. Jaffar arrives to seek the hand of the princess, and then the plot gets interesting.

There is a curse, Ahmad is blinded, Abu turns into a dog, and the Princess slips into a trance. And now the magic begins, leading the film to a very satisfying conclusion.

I will not summarize the plot any further, but encourage everyone to see the movie which is available on DVD and Blu-Ray as part of the Criterion Collection. It also shows up on TCM from time to time. It is truly the ultimate Arabian Night's Fantasy.



The Silvermaid (Mary Morris), an automaton created by Jaffar. Lovely and deadly, a tool of evil.

Conrad Veidt as the evil wizard Jaffar, the ultimate in screen villainy.



June Duprez as the Princess, deep in a trance. Ahmad holds the key to her awakening.



The flying horse, created by Jaffar.



Abu meets the Djinn

John Justin and June Duprez.



Abu stealing the All Seeing Eye



Rex Ingram and Sabu



Sabu as The Thief of Bagdad

Although almost seventy years old, THE THIEF OF BAGDAD holds its own with today's effects-bloated movies and CGI effects. And best of all is the magical score by Miklos Rozsa, one of the greatest composers of all time. See this movie. You will be rewarded.

Reviews by Tom Feller

First Man—

What struck me about this biography of Neil Armstrong (Ryan Gosling) is that death seemed to be almost a character in itself. This film contains four scenes in which Armstrong comes close to dying. The opening scene of the film showed him almost getting killed while piloting the X-15. The scene set during the Gemini 8 mission that featured the first docking maneuver shows him and David Scott (Christopher Abbott) almost dying because of an attitude and maneuvering rocket malfunction. Then he was almost killed practicing the lunar landing with a simulator. Finally during the moon

landing itself, Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin (Corey Stoll) almost run out of fuel while looking for a suitable landing spot. His two best friends in the astronaut corps, according to this movie, were Ed White (Jason White), who died in the Apollo I fire, and Elliott See (Patrick Fugit), who was killed while piloting his T-38. But the event that most affected him and his family was the death of his two-year old daughter Karen (Lucy Stafford) from brain cancer early in the film before he ever became an astronaut. Applying for the astronaut corps was a major life change that he and his wife (Claire Foy) decided to make in order to think about something other than their daughter.

The events as shown in the film were consistent with my recollections. Gosling meets the challenge of portraying someone who does his best never to show his emotions, no matter how painful they are. Foy is excellent as his wife Janet, but as a woman, she is allowed to express her feelings.

Mary Poppins Returns—

When I saw the original *Mary Poppins* movie in the theatre as a boy, I was disappointed, because even at a young age I felt that it had been overhyped. Consequently, I was really not concerned whether the sequel would live up to the earlier film. It could almost have been titled “Mary Poppins: The Next Generation”, because the Banks children have grown up. Michael (Ben Whishaw) is a widower with three children (Pixie Davies, Nathanael Saleh, and Joel Dawson), and Jane (Emily Mortimer) is a labor organizer. Michael is an incompetent financial manager, and their house, which he and Jane inherited from their parents, is on the verge of foreclosure. Then Mary Poppins (Emily Blunt) falls out of the sky to solve all their problems.

Blunt is a better singer than I was expecting, but the best performance is turned in by Lin-Manuel Miranda as Jack, a lamplighter, a nephew of Bert the chimneysweep, and friend of Mary’s who knows about her supernatural powers. Julie Walters as the Banks family servant and Colin Firth as an evil banker are competent with notable turns by Meryl Streep as Mary’s cousin, Angela Lansbury, Karen Dotrice, who played Jane in the original, and Dick Van Dyke in cameo roles. The costuming and production design are excellent. However, I felt that the music is not even in the same class as the original, which included the songs “A Spoonful of Sugar”, “Chim Chim Cher-ee” (winner for Best Song that year), “Let’s Go Fly a Kite”, and, of course, “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious”. The comparison is made worse by the filmmakers’ insistence on making each song-and-dance number an equivalent of the ones in the original. For example, the new movie’s “Trip a Little Light Fantastic” is meant to be the equivalent of “Step in Time”. The main problem with the new movie is that it too slavishly imitates the original.

The animation was hand-drawn by 70 artists, some of whom came out of retirement for this project. Their pencil and paper drawings were then scanned into a computer system where they were digitally inked and colored. The new movie even brought back the penguins, which I thought was a good move.

Replicas—

William Foster (Keanu Reeves) is a neuroscientist working for a biotech company who is trying to capture the consciousness of recently dead people and copy them to an artificial intelligence. It just so happens that cloning experiments conducted by his friend Ed (Thomas Middleditch) are taking place at the same facility, which is in Puerto Rico. When Foster's wife (Alice Eve) and three children (Emily Alyn Lind, Emjay Anthony, and Aria Lyric Leabu) are killed in a drowning accident, he captures their memories and attempts to copy them to cloned bodies. Complications ensue, of course. This film is a mess, but a very entertaining one.