

ALICE IN WONDERLAND

RELEASED BY RKO RADIO PICTURES ON JULY 28, 1951. Technicolor. Production supervisor: Ben Sharpsteen. Directors: Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske, Wilfred Jackson. Animating directors: Milt Kahl, Ward Kimball, Franklin Thomas, Eric Larson, John Lounsbery, Oliver Johnston, Jr., Wolfgang Reitherman, Marc Davis, Les Clark, Norman Ferguson. Story: Winston Hibler, Bill Peet, Joe Rinaldi, Bill Cottrell, Joe Grant, Del Connell, Ted Sears, Erdman Penner, Milt Banta, Dick Kelsey, Dick Huemer, Tom Oreb, John Walbridge. Character animators: Hal King, Judge Whitaker, Hal Ambro, Bill Justice, Phil Duncan, Bob Carlson, Don Lusk, Cliff Nordberg, Harvey Toombs, Fred Moore, Marvin Woodward, Hugh Fraser, Charles Nichols. Effects animation: Joshua Meador, Dan MacManus, George Rowley, Blaine Gibson. Color and styling: John Hench, Mary Blair, Claude Coats, Ken Anderson, Don Da Gradi. Layout: Mac Stewart, Hugh Hennesy, Tom Codrick, Don Griffith, Charles Phillipi, Thor Putnam, A. Kendall O'Connor, Lance Nolley. Backgrounds: Ray Huffine, Ralph Hulet, Art Riley, Brice Mack, Dick Anthony, Thelma Witmer. Musical score: Oliver Wallace. Orchestrations: Joseph Dubin. Vocal arrangements: Jud Conlon. Running time: 75 minutes.

Songs: "Very Good Advice," "In a World of My Own," "All in a Golden Afternoon," "Alice in Wonderland," "The Walrus and the Carpenter," "The Caucus Race," "I'm Late," "Painting the Roses Red," "March of the Cards" by Bob Hilliard and Sammy Fain. "Twas Brillig" by Don Raye and Gene DePaul. "The Unbirthday Song" by Mack David, Al Hoffman, and Jerry Livingston. "We'll Smoke the Blighter Out," "Old Father William," "A E I O U" by Oliver Wallace and Ted Sears.

Voices: Kathryn Beaumont (Alice), Ed Wynn (Mad Hatter), Richard Haydn (Caterpillar), Sterling Holloway (Cheshire Cat), Jerry Colonna (March Hare), Verna Felton (Queen of Hearts), Pat O'Malley (Walrus, Carpenter, Tweedledee and Tweedledum), Bill Thompson (White Rabbit, Dodo), Heather Angel (Alice's Sister), Joseph Kearns (Doorknob), Larry Grey (Ball), Queenie Leonard (Bird in the Tree), Dink Trout (King of Hearts), Doris Lloyd (The Rose), James Macdonald (Dormouse), The Mello Men (Card Painters), Pinto Colvig (Flamingoes), Ken Beaumont



Alice, suddenly enlarged, scolds the egotistical Queen in Wonderland. © Walt Disney Productions

(Card Painter), Ed Penner (Baglet), Larry Grey (Card Painter), Queenie Leonard (Flower), Don Barclay.

One could say that Disney's first contact with Lewis Carroll's fable came in the 1920s, with the *Alice in Cartoonland* series, featuring a live girl playing in a cartoon world. In 1937 Mickey Mouse starred in an ambitious short inspired by Carroll's classic called *Thru the Mirror*. But the idea of a bona fide feature-length adaptation of this literary classic occurred to Disney many times. In 1933 there was serious talk of Mary Pickford starring in such a film, combining live action and animation. In 1945 the studio announced that Ginger Rogers was going to star. Then, after *Song of the South*, Disney planned to build the film around his new juvenile star, Luana Patten. (He formally registered the title with the MPAA in 1938.)

Finally, in 1946, he decided to go ahead with the film as an all-cartoon feature. Initially, the studio declared that it would be drawn in the style of the famous Sir John Tenniel illustrations. Disney ex-



The Mad Hatter pours, after a fashion, at his un-birthday party © Walt Disney Productions

Disney shows some sketches to Kathryn Beaumont, the voice of Alice. Courtesy British Film Institute



plained: "When you deal with such a popular classic you're laying yourself wide open to the critics."

But before long, as the feature took shape, it became clear that simply bringing the Tenniel drawings to life was both impractical and not what Disney lovers would expect. So the artists and animators consulted Tenniel's work and came up with free translations of his characters, close enough to the originals to be identifiable, distinctive enough to be recognized as Disney creations.

And for the first time since the classic animated features of the early 1940s, a full-length live-action film was shot for the animators to consult (featuring most of the actors who supplied the film's voices). The resulting cartoon feature took five years to complete at an estimated cost of \$3 million.

Unlike the other Disney features derived from classic books, *Alice does not open on a storybook*. Rather, it begins with a view of Big Ben, pulling back to reveal Alice and her older sister sitting under a shady tree by a stream. As her sister reads, Alice daydreams, lying in the grass, and suddenly discovers before her a quaint White Rabbit singing "I'm late" as he runs into a nearby hole.

Alice follows, and falls down the rabbit hole, floating through space, passing all kinds of distorted objects and settings, and unreal color patterns. When she finally lands, it is on her head, and she turns rightside up to follow the rabbit, who has gone through a doorway.

From this point on, it is Lewis Carroll's story, with all the familiar elements: Alice trying to get herself the right size to pass through the keyhole of the door, encountering Tweedledee and Tweedledum, who tell the story of the Walrus and the Carpenter, and meeting such unusual characters as an opium-smoking caterpillar and the Cheshire Cat.

She attends a Mad Tea Party with the Mad Hatter and March Hare, and wanders off to meet the Queen, who invites Alice to participate in a most unscrupulous game of croquet, after which Alice is put on trial, and forced to escape this insane world back through the keyhole . . . at which time she wakes up and finds the whole episode has been a dream.

Alice is the most episodic of Disney's full-length story features, and as such has more trouble maintaining pace and continuity than most. The Walrus and Carpenter story, for instance, although faithful to Carroll, seems extraneous and bothersome in that it keeps Alice from moving on and proceeding with her adventures. Of course, most of her encounters are essentially obstacles to Alice, but they are taken care of with more dispatch than this.

The caterpillar, for instance, asks Alice "Who-O-R U?" blowing those letters into the air as he pulls away. She valiantly attempts to hold a conversation with him, though his non sequiturs make it almost impossible. At the brink of exasperation, she tries to continue, but he disappears in a cloud of smoke.

when it clears, he's floating overhead, a butterfly who's content to flutter off and leave her behind in a daze.

Directing animator Ward Kimball feels that the film

~~degenerated into a loud-mouthed vaudeville show. There's no denying that there are many charming bits in our Alice, but it lacks warmth and an overall story glue. Alice suffered from too many cooks—~~directors. Here was a case of five directors each trying to top the other guy and make his sequences the biggest and craziest in the show. This had a self-cancelling effect on the final product.

For example, I was in charge of the animation for the Mad Tea Party, Tweedledee and Tweedledum, and the Cheshire Cat, but because all of the other sequences in the show tried to be "mad," the result was that the only real "mad" thing in the whole picture, in my opinion, turned out to be the Cheshire Cat! Why? Because compared to the constant, all-out, wild gyrations of the other characters, he played it real cool. His quiet, underplayed subtleties consequently stole the show!

The Cheshire Cat is, unquestionably, one of the most memorable things about the film. He first appears as a toothy smile, the rest of his body gradually materializing around it, as he sings an offhand rendition of "Jabberwocky." He playfully asks Alice, "Can you stand on your head?" as his body swings aside and hops on top of his head, perched atop a tree.

As great as the Cat is visually, however, it and all of Alice's other characters benefit tremendously from their voices, and for this film Disney chose very formidable actors to supply them. It is one of the first times in Disney animated features where the viewer is thinking about the actor while watching the character on screen, an unhealthy trend that resurfaced in the 1960s.

For the most part the idea worked to Alice's advantage, however. Sterling Holloway is delightfully coy as the Cheshire Cat, Richard Haydn is ideal as the Caterpillar, and in the Mad Tea Party sequence, Ed Wynn and Jerry Colonna are hilarious as the Mad Hatter and the March Hare, respectively.

What one remembers specifically about the Tea Party are those two delightful voices, and "The Unbirthday Song," more than the visuals, although there are some very funny gags, as when the White Rabbit stumbles in and makes the mistake of mentioning that his watch is broken. The Hatter takes it in hand, opens it up, and, with the Hare, gives the watch a lightning-paced going-over that involves pouring every conceivable item on the table into the tiny time-piece. Finally, when the Hare hands him some mustard, the Mad Hatter stops dead in his tracks, looks at the mustard and comments, "Don't let's be silly!"

One of the best visual scenes in the film involves

the march of the cards, heralding the Queen's arrival. Here colors flash on the screen and the cards form a succession of geometric figures as they march along, with various imaginative camera angles heightening the effect. The scene concludes with a ready-made card game; the cards shuffle themselves and deal out to nonexistent players.

The climactic sequence with the Queen is quite funny, also benefiting from a particularly strong voice characterization by Verna Felton.

The film's other visual highlight is the flower sequence, where Alice finds herself wandering among oversized and strongly individualistic flowers, which take on various personality traits (a snooty society woman with a laced bodice, two drunken buttercups, etc.) in an especially colorful and beautifully designed scene.

~~In all, Alice in Wonderland is a very flashy and generally entertaining film, but it lacks that essential thread that made Disney's best features hang together, and, moreover, it lacks warmth. Of course, Alice is not Snow White or Cinderella, and one shouldn't demand the same things of it. Yet Disney's best animated features have always communicated something to their audience that would leave the viewer with an after-glow, feeling he had just undergone an experience, as opposed to watching a cartoon. Alice has no such after-effects. Once over, it can be dismissed, and though one wouldn't have wanted Disney to turn the story into a Grimm's fairy tale, there should have been some way to give the audience more empathy with its heroine.~~

The critics, as Disney had anticipated, had their knives sharpened in readiness for Alice. The *New Yorker* wrote:

In Mr. Disney's *Alice* there is a blind incapacity to understand that a literary masterwork cannot be improved by the introduction of shiny little tunes, and touches more suited to a flea circus than to a major imaginative effort. . . . Possibly nobody is going to create a visualization of *Alice* that won't do violence to the nostalgic imagery of the piece that remains in the mind's eye of those who grew up on Tenniel's illustrations. But even granting a certain latitude for variations in approach, [the film is] a dreadful mockery of the classic.

Even *Life* magazine, one of Disney's staunchest supporters, noted that "the leering loony faces he has concocted will be a shock to oldsters brought up on the famous John Tenniel illustrations."

For the most part critical reaction has played a small role in shaping the popularity of Disney's films, but somehow, either because of the bad reviews or simply because *Alice* did not have the appeal of the more universal Grimm's fairy tales and such, *Alice in Wonderland* did not perform as well at the box office as Disney had expected. Accordingly, it was one of the few cartoon features he allowed to be shown on his

1974
 TV program, and consequently it was not reissued theatrically for many, many years. It was made available for 16mm rental, however, and in the late 1960s became a great success on the college circuit, with its "mind-blowing" surrealism and natural links to the drug culture. Although the studio did not discourage such identification with *Fantasia* around this time, there seems to have been some reluctance to have another movie "high" associated with Disney, and *Alice* was withdrawn from 16mm release. Then, in 1974, *Alice in Wonderland* was given its first theatrical reissue—with a psychedelic poster!

Another sidenote concerns the fact that when *Alice* was about to be released, a small New York distribution company cleverly acquired the rights to a French puppet film of *Alice in Wonderland* made by Louis Bunin, and scheduled it to open at the same

time as the Disney cartoon. The Disney company tried to obtain an injunction to withhold the rival film for eighteen months, claiming that the public would be misled by competitive advertising, but the motion picture court was denied and the Bunin film opened, to general bad reviews. There was some confusion in cities where both films were playing, but the Bunin film did not affect the overall outcome of the Disney feature at the box office.

The enduring success of the music score to *Alice in Wonderland*—particularly "I'm Late" and "The Birthday Song"—helped to keep the memory of the film alive during its long absence from general public view. But now the film itself is back, and sharing the spotlight with Disney's other "golden age" animated features.

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