

'The Witches' falls short as a children's tale

NEW YORK (CNS) — Everyone loves a good scary tale, but "The Witches" (Warner Bros.) may not suit all tastes.

The story, which is based on Roald Dahl's contemporary fairy tale, opens with a Norwegian grandmother (Mai Zetterling) explaining to her 9-year-old American grandson, Luke (Jason Fisher), how to guard against witches.

The grandmother tells exciting stories of her own experience with witches, including one about a childhood friend who runs afoul of a witch who imprisons her in a painting.

With the atmosphere of fantasy firmly established, the scene shifts to a resort hotel in Great Britain where the orphaned Luke is taken by his devoted grandmother.

Here the fantasy bogs down in the heavy dramatics of eccentric British characters and a host of witches holding a convention in the hotel under the guise of The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

Luke happens to overhear the plans of the Grand High Witch (Anjelica Huston) to use a magic potion that will turn all of Britain's children into mice.

Caught in the act of eavesdropping, Luke himself is turned into a mouse, but with his grandmother's help — even in his vulnerable condition — he is able to thwart the horrible plot of the terrible witches.

Produced by the late Jim Henson and directed by Nicolas Roeg, the fantasy gets off to a good start but bogs down in the flamboyant performances of the Grand High Witch and her minions as they camp



Anjelica Huston portrays Grand High Witch Miss Ernst, whose evil plan to turn all the children of England into mice is discovered by an American boy (Jason Fisher) and his grandmother (Mai Zetterling) in "The Witches" (Warner Bros.).



Pirate radio DJ 'Hard Harry' (Christian Slater) responds to a letter from one of his troubled listeners in "Pump Up The Volume." New Line Cinema

Insights undermined in latest teen movie

NEW YORK (CNS) — Christian Slater plays a painfully shy teen named Mark, who can't make any friends at school, but is popular as a nighttime pirate DJ using the suggestive name of Hard Harry in "Pump Up the Volume" (New Line).

Despite his manufactured bravado, Mark is sensitive to the genuine problems teens face, noting for example, "you're expected to get accepted, get a girlfriend and find something great to do for the rest of your life."

But when he breaks into the airwaves he also flaunts his uninhibited side, loudly simulating masturbatory acts and encouraging listeners to write him letters with their body fluids on them. The kids love it and soon the whole high school is waiting on his every word.

Harry's urging teens to demand needed reforms at their school makes him popular, but when a troubled teen commits suicide following an on-air conversation with him, his nights as an unidentified pirate are numbered.

Written and directed by Allan Moyle, the film uses a teen's perspective to raise questions about the pressures of emerging sexuality, feelings of loneliness, aliena-

tion, homosexuality and teen suicide.

Sometimes Harry's dialogue is poignant, and sometimes it is borderline subversive. Slater gives a skilled performance as the repressed teen who can only express his real feelings while crouched over a mike hidden in his basement.

The adult figures are less sympathetic. With the exception of a young teacher who admires Hard Harry's outrageous style, the 30-plus set are portrayed as pompous authority figures. This is especially troublesome given that, by contrast, the film presents Harry as a near-heroic leader.

Teenagers will probably find this film compelling, and it is serious enough to invite discussion. Harry's final broadcast discourages suicide, quitting school and apathy, but also offers misguided advice that creates more of a barrier than a bridge to meaningful insights.

The film contains positive depiction of radio piracy, simulated masturbations, frequent rough language and a flash of partial nudity. The U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

up their wicked roles.

Huston's fright face and the repulsive features of the other witches will scare the daylight out of small children and give feminists indigestion.

Luke's transformation into a rodent works quite well and youngsters are likely to be delighted with his animated antics as a furry little creature.

Best of all is Zetterling's performance as the wise old grandmother who is completely unfazed by the magical power of the witches. Her reassuring presence helps Luke and young viewers take the strange goings-on in stride.

For all its production values, however, the movie's magic is more in the wizardry

of make-up and special effects than in the characters and situation. The result lacks the charm, simplicity and innocence associated with classic children's tales.

This was also true of Henson's theatrical features, "The Dark Crystal" (1983) and "Labyrinth" (1986). Perhaps in these non-Muppet works, Henson was trying too hard to keep the grown-ups interested.

"The Witches" has some good fun but it should have been better.

Because of some intense menace, discreet sexual references and an instance of profanity, the USCC classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The MPA rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

Poor characterization flaws 'Air America'

NEW YORK (CNS) — The skies are unfriendly during the Vietnam War for the CIA in "Air America" (Tri-Star).

Gene (Mel Gibson), a war-weary mercenary flying questionable cargo, is eager to complete his own private gun-running operation so he can cash in and retire.

He's assigned to break in the new recruit, Billy (Robert Downey Jr.), an innocent who took the job for the excitement it offered yet is shocked to find their planes are regularly shot at. Billy's also appalled that his superiors (Ken Jenkins and David Marshall Grant) are in cahoots with a Laotian general (Burt Kwouk) who does double duty as a drug lord to fund his anti-communist military operations, with a defunct Pepsi-Cola plant serving to process the heroin.

The scheming threesome is forced to disguise their operation from Senator Davenport (Lane Smith), who has arrived from Washington to look into Air America but is also looking to win headlines back home.

When Billy is set up as the sacrificial scapegoat with drugs planted on his plane, Gene attempts to deliver his final lucrative arms shipment, find Billy, who has evaded arrest by crash-landing, and rescue a horde of Laotian refugees.

Never were reckless mercenaries made out to be so engagingly hip as in director Roger Spottiswoode's aggressively cocky

"Air America." Nothing fazes these cool superheroes; fear just isn't in their vocabulary — only glib dialogue is.

Their hot-dogging airborne exploits under fire assume even greater excitement thanks to a thunderous rock score of such less-than-subtle selections as "Rescue Me," "Right Place, Wrong Time" and "Gimme Shelter," culminating with the smug ending that is further buoyed by Sinatra's crooning of "Come Fly with Me."

While at least Gibson and Downey get to act with a patina of effortless ease, the roles of the senator and three military figures call for absurd screeching caricatures that are embarrassing to watch. The use of Richard Nixon look-alike Smith as the bombastic senator is also an all-too-obvious device to evoke the era in which the movie is set.

A typical example of the film's lame humor shows Gene leaving the novice Billy alone at the cockpit controls so that he can play with his crayons and coloring book.

These guys are definitely not role models for impressionable adolescents. It will take all the appeal of Gibson and Downey to keep "Air America" aloft.

Because of the idealized depiction of lawless mercenaries, frequent foul language and references to sex as a commodity, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.