The first big “event movie” of 2010 arrived last Friday in the form of Tim Burton’s wildly anarchic “Alice in Wonderland”. At first glance, a film about Alice once again falling down the Rabbit Hole thirteen years after her original journey would seem tailor made for the imaginative mind of Burton. Unfortunately, while the movie is a visual feast, it is emotionally void with a stale narrative that makes it nearly impossible to connect with the characters.

The set up is excellent. In Victorian London, the bold and imaginative Charles Kingsleigh is interrupted in mid pitch to potential investors by his six year old daughter Alice talking about her disturbing dreams of impossible events such as a talking rabbit in a waist-coat. “Sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast”, responds her father.

Flash forward thirteen years, where Alice is still morose upon the loss of her beloved father, going to a fancy party where her mother expects her to accept an engagement proposal from the foppish son of a Lord. Of course, the young man named Hamish is a total loser. Not a bad person, per se, but a clueless, wimpy sop with “intestinal problems”. He proposes at the gazebo with hundreds of people watching, fully expecting Alice to accept. But having just seen what she thought was a White Rabbit in a waist-coat a few minutes earlier, Alice says that she needs a minute, and runs off to find the rabbit…and finding the infamous Rabbit Hole once again.

We spend the next fifteen minutes in very familiar territory as Alice finds herself in the room where she is once again too tall to fit through the door, but then too small to reach the key, necessitating the “Drink Me” shrinking formula and the “Eat Me” growing cake.

Once outside the door, it is somewhat similar to Dorothy stepping out of the house to first visit Oz…but very, very skewed. She runs across all of the normal characters; the Blue Caterpillar, the Cheshire Cat, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and the dooremouse…all of whom doubt that she is THE Alice. Alice quite agrees, all the while insisting that she is actually just dreaming, so it’s no big deal.

The major changes of the plot from the original story comes with the meeting with The Mad Hatter (Johnny Depp), who explains how the Red Queen (Helena Bonham Carter) has wreaked havoc over the years on the peaceful creatures of Underland (not Wonderland, as six year old Alice thought), using the brutish Knave of Hearts (a nice turn from the enigmatic Crispin Glover) and the terrifying Jabberwocky to put down any resistance. It seems that the morose but kind-hearted White Queen (Anne Hathaway) must find a champion to battle the Jabberwocky, and believes that Alice would fit that bill.

The “plot” that I just detailed is nothing more than a framework for Burton to hang his imagery upon, and it just doesn’t quite work. First and foremost is the use of 3-D technology. Quite frankly, I found it distracting and ineffective. There are many times where it is ether not used at all, or used poorly and confusingly. The only scenes enhanced by the 3-D were the final battle scenes between the card soldiers of the Red Queen and the chess piece soldiers of the White Queen, along with Alice’s battle with the Jabberwocky. The rest of the time, Burton doesn’t quite seem to know how to use it, other than amusing himself way too many times by making people duck by having the insane March Hare throwing some object or another at someone, coming straight out into the audience after it misses.

The bigger problem is the fact that Burton, as imaginative of a director as there has ever been, looks to have ran out of ideas in many regards, as Wonderland appears to be the exact same gothic strangeness that we’ve seen in “Sleepy Hollow” and “The Nightmare Before Christmas”. I was constantly distracted by visuals that made me think “when is the Headless Horseman or Jack Skellington going to show up?” It didn’t just seem similar…it seemed to be exactly the same. Which is a shame, as Burton has recently shown that he CAN have different visuals and still not lose his “style”, which was shown so expertly in both “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory” and “Sweeny Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street”. I went in expecting Burton to continue this melding of styles with Lewis Carrol’s beloved work…but it was too much Burton-goth, and too little Carrol-fantasy.

This style over substance approach's biggest victim was the script, which lost its soul in the shuffle. Johnny Depp is one of our top actors, and normally thrives on this kind of role, but there just wasn't much he could do with the Hatter given the constraints of the story. I saw a few signs of attempted life where Depp would be allowed to put a little humanity into his over-the-top presentation, but it was only enough to make me feel that the best of his performance ended up on the editing room floor in favor of more action scenes.

Similarly impacted is Bonham Carter, who isn't nearly the acting talent as Depp, but still much better than the one-dimensional cartoon character she becomes here. Meanwhile, Anne Hathaway, as her sister, looks totally bored. Crispin Glover is effectively creepy…but then again, it is Crispin Glover, and that's what you'd say about him if you saw him in real life as well.

Saving the movie, in my mind, was the breakout performance of Mia Wasikowska as Alice. The 20 year old Australian who first came to my attention as the young gymnast abused by her coach in HBO's "In Treatment" is the one character and actor worth watching in this film. She was fully able to flesh out her character as a strong but confused young woman, not an easy task given that everyone's preconceived images of Alice as a young girl. Taking this character to now be someone still in that awkward phase between being a girl and being a woman could have backfired badly if the wrong person was cast in that role. Wasikowska was totally believable at all times; whether she is whining to her mother about her lot in life, childishly threatening to tattle on two obnoxious "friends", blithely wandering through Wonderland when she's sure she's dreaming, or becoming the action hero she needs to become at the end to save the day.

Wasikowska also shines through at the very end, with a couple of short scenes "back in the real world" where she is able to resolve the character's issues in a way that was quite satisfactory to me.

In all, this is not a bad movie to watch. You never will really sit there and think "I hate this", nor will you be checking your watch several times to see how quickly this would all come to an end. Visually, while not on the "Oh, my Gawd" level of "Avatar", it is still quite entertaining…as long as you can handle the obvious inadequacies. But where I think "Avatar" must be seen on the big screen in 3-D to truly appreciate it, I don't think you'd miss that much if you wait to see "Alice in Wonderland" on DVD.

My Rating – Kelly Holcomb (2 footballs).