Dr Plonk


Date of review: Thursday 23rd August, 2007

Writer/director/editor: Rolf de Heer
Classification: G
Duration: 85 minutes
We rate it: Five stars.

This delightful comedy from Rolf de Heer serves to once again prove that the Adelaide-based filmmaker is one of the most gifted and restlessly inventive filmmakers working in the medium. A silent black-and-white film made in the tradition of Buster Keaton and the Keystone Cops, Dr Plonk is a slapstick tale about (among other things) the perils of time-travel and the resourcefulness of Jack Russell Terriers.

Nigel Lunghi (best known both here and abroad as a street performer going by the name of Mr Spin) plays the title character, a not-quite-mad – though certainly eccentric – inventor and scientist who, while working away in his lab in 1907, discovers that the world is going to end in 101 years. The solution to this alarming conundrum is quite obviously time travel; Dr Plonk will design a time machine that will allow him to leap forward to 2007 and warn the powers that be about the impending catastrophe. This plan, fine in theory, will of course turn out to be far more difficult to implement than Dr Plonk is able to forsee.

De Heer has made many of his remarkable films under quite difficult circumstances. From shooting with non-professional actors and a number of different camera crews on Bad Boy Bubby, to working in 50-degree temperatures on The Tracker to shooting in the crocodile-inhabited swamps of Arnhem Land for Ten Canoes, the remarkably creative de Heer has never taken the easy way out. Production conditions for Dr Plonk might best be described as anachronistic rather than tortuous; working in the tradition of silent comedies, de Heer shot the film on a hand-cranked camera, in an Academy standard aspect ratio, working with a minimal camera crew and often using natural light. Making a film in this hundred-year-old way has enabled the director to inhabit this glorious filmmaking style in both the narrative and technical senses. This film doesn’t just look and feel like the slapstick comedies of old, it was made using almost exactly that original technology, and the film’s visual grammar attests to that beautifully.

Prescott, Nick 2007. Review of "Dr Plonk", directed by Rolf de Heer. 891 ABC Adelaide website.
Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au
Of course Rolf manages to work in some wry political commentary along the way (setting the film partly in 1907 and partly in the present allows for some wonderful parallelling and contrasting) and there’s even a minor though crucial consideration of terrorism and detention. None of this commentary and dig-making overwhelms the film, though; Dr Plonk is more than anything a gleeful celebration of the early cinema, with everything from people slipping on banana peels to undercranked car-chases to a dog that saves the day. This is gloriously enjoyable stuff, buoyed by a beautiful musical score and performed to a t by a talented and expressive cast. Dr Plonk is literally a film the likes of which you won’t have seen for a hundred years, and it’s a work that cements its creator’s place as the most breathtakingly inventive filmmaker in the country.

Nick Prescott