

Barbarella

Two film reviews

Thomas Haroldson

Hank Malone

1968

1. Thomas Haroldson

“Barbarella” is a gas. No doubt about it. In fact, it is one of the most enjoyable and imaginative movies ever made.

The picture, in a sense, takes Candy to the year 40,000 and drops her off somewhere just this side of surrealism. And all in all it's a damn fine trip.

Since Barbarella, like other masturbatory heroines, is a product of pure imagination, it is only proper that she is at last free from the mundane restrictions of earthly reality.

The distant future is an excellent setting for an erotic fantasy, because there almost anything is possible.

For example, when was the last time you saw a girl strip in space? The film opens with Jane Fonda (one expects her to say “Good grief—it's Daddy!” at any moment) slowly removing her space suit as she drifts about weightlessly.

The dance (if that's what it can be called) sets the tone of the entire picture: it's camp—a parody of old-fashioned strip tease; it's erotic—Jane virtually masturbates against space; it's honest—no clever tricks are used to conceal her nudity; and, finally, it's beautifully photographed—as is the whole film.

The movie from this point on is a freeform cinematic comic book that never becomes “meaningful” in the traditional sense. But I can't imagine anyone wanting it any other way.

However, one must have a good sense of humor and a hip appreciation of the absurd, to fully enjoy the picture. Much of the humor is visual, and it is up to the audience to dig what's going on.

But the most obvious humorous aspects of the film are difficult to miss. The plot, the dialog, the costumes, the setting etc. border on the lunatic fringe of science fiction. No one in their right mind would take the entire picture seriously.

This is not to say, however, that “Barbarella” never skirts the fringes of poetic statement. In fact, some of the episodes are so beautiful and so potentially profound that one is a bit annoyed when they are not explored in greater depth.

The most interesting character, aside from Barbarella, is the blind angel, Pygar, played by John Phillip Law. It is Pygar who introduces a serious poetic note into the film with such lines as: “I do not make love, I am love,” and, “An angel has no memory.”

Pygar is also featured in a great aerial dogfight in which he and Barbarella successfully beat off the bad guys. One tight, inside loop that he executes with Barbarella in his arms is one of the most beautiful shots I have ever seen on the screen.

Of course, any picture that deals with eroticism and evil cannot remain completely superficial. Sooner or later reality breaks through, and the film suddenly becomes documentary. For example, when Jane is put in a pleasure machine (the ultimate vaginal vibrator), the graphic depiction of her orgasm leaves nothing to the imagination.

But most of the picture is surrealistic, not realistic. Salvador Dali could easily have filmed some of the episodes. The world of “Barbarella” is part dream, part fetish (lots of whips and leather), part reality, and part nonsense.

The only time the film falls flat is when Jane comes down too hard on her campy dialog. About six lines could be, and should be, cut from the picture—they’re really terrible.

But six bad lines, or twenty bad lines, cannot ruin this film—it’s simply too good. “Barbarella”—as you’ll soon discover, is a motion picture of the future in more ways than one.

2. Hank Malone

See Barbarella. Run. Absolutely. See The Fonda fly and run through the husband Roger Vadim’s spiraling Grande Ballroom playpen of the 25th century. See the mind-boggling super-chromatic Universe. Listen to the haze-of-illusion music. Let the wax drip in your ears. Let Time slide out of you. Touch the Starfish. Listen to the thundering bubbles of the daybreak chambers. Hurl yourself into the images of images of images.

Except for her tight-little-trim-60-watt-bulb body, Jane Fonda makes little contribution to the film, very little. Surrounded by a gigantic and brilliant production staff (doing their Things) and a marvelously hokey screenplay by none other than Hollywood’s own Dr. Strange-love—Terry Southern, Jane is quickly swallowed up and forgotten.

With the exception of a few moments of Velvet Underground dressing/undressing scenery, Jane remains largely invisible as the giant Grandfather of a film lifts off the Earth and heads toward the star-lined corridors of timelessness.

This is a very Fun film, weird and cosmic but with none of the strangely fashionable seriousness of a silent empty wilderness in which one is supposed to figure out the ultimate Meaning of the Secret depths of Wisdom. etc. Barbarella is not a spiritual landing-barge. It is instead a seemingly unending cornucopia of deliciously glowing oil bubbles and furious roars, an authentic fairy tale.

Despite the ingenuity of its conception by Jean Claude Forest, there is much in this film that harbors visibly and highly respectable remnants of The Odyssey, The Divine Comedy, Bulfinch’s Mythology, The Velvet Underground, The Perils of Pauline, Dr. No, Candy, and Buck Rogers.

It is a playful picture (though perhaps overly-hokey with Jane Fonda’s vacant ineptitude as Barbarella) in the most marvelous and rare sense of the word; a banquet of dreams, illusions, and blossoms.

See Barbarella. And do your own thing.

fifth Estate

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