

★ ★ ★ ★ An American Tail

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It's been a good year for Disney. Their comedies, such as *Ruthless People* and *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* have been funny while their prestige picture, *The Color Of Money*, has been a critical success. And they've all made money.

So, perhaps that will make it easier for Disney to watch as Steven Spielberg takes the lead in the area they've had a virtual monopoly on for the past 50 years: animated films.

Sure, they returned to form somewhat with this year's *The Great Mouse Detective*, an entertaining and moderately successful movie. But *An American Tail* is much better. The animation is, to my eyes, lush and more compelling. Plus, the story is more involving. And while *The Great Mouse Detective* had the wonderfully hammy overacting of Vincent Price, this movie has Dom DeLuise and Madeline Kahn, both of whom are hysterical.

The story concerns Fievel Mousekewitz, a plucky Jewish mouse whose family is driven out of Russia by Cossack cats. His family travels on a ship to turn-of-the-century America, but Fievel is accidentally separated from his family and left to face the New World on his own.

On the trip over, Fievel's father had all the mice singing, "There are no cats in America and the streets are paved with cheese!" but Fievel quickly discovers that there are cats in America. The rest of the movie is devoted to Fievel's efforts to help the mice defeat the cats, as well as his search for his family.

Like Disney classics, such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *An American Tail* provides wide-eyed wonder for the kids we feel obliged to bring along. But like those classics, this movie is also bursting with enough humor and subtle satire to keep adults thoroughly amused. In fact, I think I liked this movie even more than the children I went with. And they liked it.

Some critics have charged that *An American Tail* cops out. They say it began with a strong ethnic background and then degenerated

into a homogenized, bland story that could be about any immigrant.

These charges seem very similar to the ones leveled against *The Cosby Show*. Critics of that sitcom have said it should be more socially relevant, more aware of the black experience. But it's no coincidence that the weakest and least funny episodes of that show have been when they've tried to inject some social commentary.

And while it's certainly possible to make a socially relevant animated film, to say *An American Tail* isn't one is hardly a valid criticism. It is, quite simply, a warm, good-humored movie that's filled with optimism and charm. And that's plenty. Disney just better hope Steven Spielberg never decides to build an amusement park.

by Michael Giltz