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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: August 31, 2010 04:40 PM

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A Toast to Dudley Moore's Arthur

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I've been wary of the remake of the classic comedy *Arthur* ever since it's been announced. And now that I've read the comments of the artists involved in a *New York Times* feature, I'm even more worried. They don't seem to have a clue as to what *Arthur* was about.

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SPOILER: If you've never seen the 1981 gem about a drunken playboy who finds true love, by all means rent it now. It won an Oscar for the great John Gielgud, features Liza Minnelli in her best performance outside of *Cabaret* and boasts one of the smartest screenplays around. The following comments detail the plot at length and will spoil the film if you aren't familiar with it already.

Stars Russell Brand and Helen Mirren and director Jason Winer (of *Modern Family* success) -- not to mention the article's author -- all seem to think that the original needs help if it's to be relevant, that Dudley Moore's character is a drunk at the beginning and a drunk at the end, that Arthur doesn't grow or change and that above all it celebrates wealth in a wallowing sort of Reagan-era manner. All of this is patently wrong.

At the beginning of the film, Arthur is a spoiled, sad, lonely drunk who is too cowardly to stand up to his father. By the end, he is happy, in love, an adult, sober (at least symbolically) and brave enough to toss aside every penny of his wealth in order to be with the woman he loves. A child could detail the changes in Arthur, even if Hobson didn't spell it out for us in a crucial scene. How could these artists miss that?

Helen Mirren -- a smart, wonderfully talented actor -- is playing Hobson, who in a clever and wise twist has been changed from a butler to a nanny. That's the sort of change any remake should follow, since there's no point in remaking a film without rethinking it. And a nanny is exactly what this pivotal character is to Arthur.

But Mirren had this to say to the *New York Times*: "I just didn't think a film about a drunken small guy was remotely funny. The reality about alcoholics is that they're boring and tedious, and I'd spent enough nights in pubs with drunken boys to know it was not something I'd ever want to be caught up in. And I particularly objected to the way women were depicted -- which was something I felt about most movies I saw back then -- as kind of slave-enablers."

The *NYT* article continues: "Mr. Winer shared some of Ms. Mirren's concerns. 'When I rewatched it, it was as delightful as I'd remembered, but the character never grows. At the end Arthur is just as drunk as he was at the beginning, and Liza Minnelli's character essentially steps into the role of caretaker.'"

Well Mirren's absolutely right in one respect. But the key word there is "reality." In real-life most drunks are indeed tiresome and virtually none are remotely as funny as Moore in the movie. But this isn't real life we're talking about. And movies have a long history of funny drunken scenes, from Katharine Hepburn and Jimmy Stewart in *The Philadelphia Story* to Lee Marvin in *Cat Ballou* and about a million other examples. (And what's with the "small guy" crack?) And has she never heard of W.C. Fields? Here's Marvin stumbling in on a funeral.

So forget "reality" when it comes to romantic comedies about billionaires who marry waitresses. But look closer to see how the movie views Arthur's drunkenness.

When is Arthur drunk? He's drunk at the beginning of the film and he's drunk when he's ashamed of

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himself -- notably he's drunk when he gets engaged to a woman he doesn't love, he's drunk when he tries to apologize to the waitress he's abandoning and asks her to be his mistress and he's drunk on the day of his arranged marriage. Arthur may be hilariously funny, but his drunkenness is always seen as an outward sign of his sadness. For me, the most heartbreaking moment in the film is when Arthur drunkenly tells his fiance not to romanticize his alcoholism. "Not everyone who drinks is a poet," says Arthur. "Some of us drink because we're not poets."

When is Arthur sober? He's ALWAYS sober around Hobson, the one person at the beginning of the film that he loves and respects. Arthur is sober when he first meets the love of his life, the shop-lifting Linda Marolla. Arthur is sober when they go on dates together, to dinner and an arcade. Arthur is sober when he stands up to Hobson and defends Linda. Arthur is sober at his public engagement party to the bland Susan where he and Linda bond even more, despite believing their romance is over. And most importantly, Arthur is sober when Hobson falls ill and Arthur steps into manhood to take care of him. Arthur is sober when it counts.

Does the movie celebrate conspicuous consumption? Hardly. Arthur is a prince, in many ways, and Linda is the commoner he whisks away to his castle. Yes, there are classic Hollywood films where the madcap heiress or wealthy playboy gives up their money. But plenty more of them -- indeed most of them -- show the commoner coming into that magical world of privilege...but only because they earn it by showing the money doesn't matter to them. Often, they fall for a prince or millionaire who is in disguise as just an average Joe.

When Linda first describes Arthur to her dad, she doesn't even think to mention that he's rich beyond belief. A running joke is that her unemployed dad cares a lot more about the money than she does. When Arthur tells Linda that he's engaged to another woman, the scene ends with Arthur sitting alone and sad in his home. Then we cut to Linda's home...where she is comforting her weeping father. It's a clever way of acknowledging the audience's desire for a life of ease and luxury without spoiling the romance.

Arthur -- out of guilt and a sincere desire to help -- later offers Linda a huge check. She throws it back in his face. His drunkenness in this scene is a source of embarrassment and Linda even chides him for it. Is Linda a "slave-enabler," as Mirren puts it? I'd be hard-pressed to say how. Linda is a strong independent woman who can take care of herself (and her father!), thank you very much.

Only two other women have roles of any note in the movie. Arthur's fiance is a bland, tiresome daddy's girl -- and the film explicitly rejects her as a suitable woman for Arthur specifically because she is so weak. And then there's Arthur's grandmother, a strong-willed eccentric woman every bit as hard-nosed a figure as the fiance's homicidal father, Burt Johnson. She's no one's pushover.

At the finale, far from wanting both money and love, Arthur specifically rejects his inheritance to break off the wedding and marry Linda. She accepts him happily, believing they'll both be just regular working people. In the final moments, when Arthur is on the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral, he is sober, at least symbolically. (The earlier scene of him being drunk at the church and finally passing out might have been an hour or so ago.) Arthur rejects the money again and says goodbye to his grandmother and his chauffeur. At the last moment, the grandmother insists he take the money back, Arthur goes over to talk to her and we're genuinely uncertain of what is happening. Yes, he takes the money. He's not an idiot, as Arthur says. But he and Linda go off to have a tuna fish sandwich rather than go sailing on the grandmother's yacht.

In that final moment of true love and genuine maturity for Arthur, the idea that he's going to remain a hopeless drunk and get tozzled four or five nights a week is simply ludicrous. He doesn't need to get drunk anymore. He's happy. How anyone can fail to see that is beyond me.

The original movie was a fairy tale itself. It was the first film from writer-director Steve Gordon, after years of decent work in TV. The movie was a left-field hit and Oscar winner, all of which Gordon was able to enjoy to the fullest before dying suddenly of a heart attack the following year. I love the movie so much I never went to see the sequel *Arthur 2: Arthur On The Rocks*, a 1988 film the late Gordon had nothing to do with. Why spoil a wonderful movie with something like that? Plenty of movie characters can be reborn from Robin Hood to Superman to Sherlock Holmes. But some are perfect just the way they are.

I hope the artists behind the remake of *Arthur* somehow capture the sweet, endearing essence of the original, even though they seem blind to its charms and the true message of the movie. They're too talented (especially Mirren) not to give it a go. And clearly they must have liked it a little, or why remake it? But me, I'm just glad it's coming out because I feel certain it means the original classic will finally be released on DVD in a letterboxed format. Until then, you can (very rarely) find the letterboxed format on TCM or download the movie from iTunes. If you do, you'll enjoy one of the cleverest scripts in Hollywood

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history. And the drinks are on me.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

drxcreatures 10:30 PM on 9/26/2010

31 Fans



Wow, Mirren wishes to star in the 'Arthur' remake, because she thinks the original is pathetic? That's pretty pathetic of HER. If she hated those guys, in all those pubs, she hung out in; what was SHE doing there?

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Kenny Wolf 12:39 PM on 9/02/2010

45 Fans

A toast to Michael Glitz for a well written post on the greatness of the original Arthur and the folly of the impending remake. The fact that this remake is being made at all speaks volumes about the times we're living in. Every suggested story line change sounds like Tea-party think tank revisionism. The new philosophy is of the how life should be, as opposed to the how life is school of self righteous superiority. The producers of this remake seem to feel compelled to fix the perceived failings of the original movie by retelling the story as though it was a promo for Alcoholics Anonymous. Unfortunately the makers of this new Arthur fail to understand the beauty of the original movie, which was it's no holds barred approach to finding the humor in adversity, being rich doesn't make life perfect in fact Arthur was an alcoholic, emotional cripple with perfect timing. The original Arthur was a love story where money was the villain and true love was the hero. The current producers and actors attached (Mirren) to the new version of Arthur believe that the excess of the original movie was unnecessary. What they don't understand is that it served the original story because it had a purpose, to teach us that redemption through true love and free will is possible. No amount of pop psychoanalysis and opinion from the re-makers of this new Arthur will change it's inevitable outcome. They are playing with fire.

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waitingforlifeafterbush 12:18 PM on 9/02/2010

13 Fans

Why then are they remaking "Arthur" - it sounds like its premise will be utterly different - given their contempt for the original, I can only guess they are "remaking" this so they can capitalize on the name of the original by calling it "Arthur" - when, in fact, it will not resemble it. It is a cynical move from what you are saying to bring in more viewers (money) to see the film.

If it wasn't to exploit the name, why then not give it a totally new title since it really is not a remake?

And, yes, I found Helen M.'s crack about "small guy" really insulting -

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laland69 08:53 AM on 9/02/2010

25 Fans

I love "Arthur". It brings back so many great memories growing up as a kid. The Screenplay is outstanding. I really didn't appreciate these great actors like many others of the past when I was a kid. I took for granted these great performance and quality films would always be around. Christopher Cross Arthur theme is still so powerful. They don't even make movie theme songs like they use to. I rarely watch new films these days. I pretty much stick with the classics. Films like Arthur is the reason why.

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Jeffreygeez 08:37 AM on 9/02/2010

65 Fans



If it is honesty Helen is looking for she should not be participating in the business of smoke and mirrors.

Yes Helen we know drunks are tedious. Any more of your sagacious wisdom to share with us?

(What next a remake of Casablanca and your cast oh so cleverly in Claude Rain's role as Capitan. Louis Renault?). the point? we like it, no we love it exactly the way it is.'

The movie is hilarious, Dudley was spot on for the part. Leave it alone.

Classics cannot be remade, or rather should not. When they are it is not to improve the art form, but to benefit financially from the controversy of an attempt to redo something that most would like to remember just the way it was and is..

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3fingerbrown 08:20 AM on 9/02/2010
119 Fans



Do yourself a favor: take a few minutes to enjoy Moore and his comedy soul mate, Peter Cook, in one of their famous routines. Watch this, then move on to the "Frog and Peach." Would Monty Python have been possible without the inspiration of Moore, Cook, and their Beyond the Fringe mates?

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z61e1Hv6gIQ>

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PresidentRobertBooth 04:53 PM on 9/01/2010
815 Fans



Russell Brand couldn't carry Dudley Moore's empty wineglass.

Another classic movie given a tiresome and mediocre rehash

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER
Sal Nunziato 04:06 PM on 9/01/2010
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Michael, great job! I was reading this with the same, edge-of-your-seat enthusiasm I would have in a great action film or suspense thriller. When I saw the NYT article a few days ago, I felt sorry for all involved. I can't and don't want to believe that talented writers with original ideas no longer exist in our world.

What's next? Jessica Alba in Sophie's Choice? Shia LaBeouf as Vito Corleone? "Imitation Of Life-3D!"

I can't take it.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER
LiberalBuzz 02:13 PM on 9/01/2010
769 Fans



OUTSTANDING article Michale, one of your absolute best. And you are completely in the right light with regards to the character of Arthur in the original movie. When he is and isn't drunk and what the movie is all about.

I lost all hope for the remake when they announced it was Russel Brand. I really like his brand of comedy and he has been pretty good in the few movies he's made, BUT he is playing Brand in all of the movies. It's hard if not almost impossible to separate Brand from his movie characters.

As him playing a newer version of Arthur I see a huge fail whether or not it makes money.

Helen Mirren will be the only saving grace of this movie which I won't bother to see anyway until it's on cable.

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NRR 02:13 PM on 9/01/2010
11 Fans

Loved the original. I have no desire to see the remake. Some things are best left alone.

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xbrooklyngrrl 02:07 PM on 9/01/2010

11 Fans

Ah, there truly are no more original ideas in Hollywood!

And I used to love Mirren. Humpfff. Utter inanity to remake a movie that was such splendid fun -- I saw it over and over -- because of the endearing, hilarious performance of Moore, and the wonderful starchy butler (the brilliant Gielgud) and eccentric love interest (Minelli never again managed eccentric without being cloying). To criticize it for, and clean up, the ludicrous drunkennes s would be remaking *Pretty Woman* and making her a secretary. It's the movies!! Find life lessons elsewhere.

Has anyone seen the trailers for the new *Hawaii 5-O* on tv? Eeesh. The original was not just another cops and babes fest, it was ground-breaking, for it's dark and odd tone, camera angles, the way Jack Lord played McGarrett, the use of actual Hawaiians to play Hawaiians. It was a brooding morality play in an era of happy endings. The new one looks like every other cops and babe fest on tv. Couldn't they have thought up something new? That's why *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* are so remarkable: oiriginals, not weak imitations.

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ehorth 04:02 PM on 9/01/2010

256 Fans



Because of the new *Hawaii 5-O*, SPIKE TV has been playing a lot of the original series episodes - great to watch if you can.

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xbrooklyngrrl 04:46 PM on 9/01/2010

11 Fans

Yeah, I was goofing off before work, had it on the tv, inspired the comment. That show still holds up.

Also, I keep imagining the fantasy Helen Mirren remake of *Pretty Woman* -- which, really, I hated, it was so saccharine -- yecchh. You just can't make everything PC. The alcohol, as the author of this blog so wisely pointed out, was a metaphor.

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waitingforlifeafterbush 12:27 PM on 9/02/2010

13 Fans

hmmm...Jack Lord. One of my first tv crushes.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

napoleon68 12:48 PM on 9/01/2010

12 Fans



was and still is a fun movie. really miss dudley moore. too many good acotrs have gone. the theme song by cross still gives me good memories of that time when i hear it.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

mary896 12:23 PM on 9/01/2010

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What a treasure filled tribute to an American classic Michael. Thank you. *Arthur* is a movie I've enjoyed countless times and own it, firts on VHS, now on DVD. ANYONE who hasn't seen it, must. It's a fulfilling, funny, rollercoaster little journey with performances you don't often get the priveledge of viewing. I think I need to see it again today. Maybe just for Hobson and Liza's dad. Smashing great time!!! And I always shed a tear of two over Hobson. Great, great, classic character.

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bicycsual 10:47 AM on 9/01/2010

22 Fans

Outstanding analysis in response to the clueless criticism. Why is she doing the remake? Clearly for the same reason the studio is. Sad but true, they reveal themselves as that which they pseudo-intellectually criticized - though I wouldn't limit it to the Reagan era; the nineties had its share of feeding at the trough, balanced budgets notwithstanding.

Mirren's comments about the original betray her motivation and expose a thinly disguised attempt to justify a remake. Maybe she believes what she is saying (actor's training?) or is in denial at what doing this film means she has become. Otherwise, I find it hard to believe that she is as unintelligent as her words would indicate.

Like you felt about the sequel, I feel about such remakes. Hollywood used to be creative at least.

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fightorleave2 10:37 AM on 9/01/2010

59 Fans

I agree with a lot of what you say (and I have no interest in a new Arthur); however, I believe that Arthur is drunk during his first date with Linda?

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bicycsual 10:50 AM on 9/01/2010

22 Fans

Nope. Good opportunity for you to watch it again.

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Fletch17C 10:59 AM on 9/01/2010

14 Fans

A drunk could never have shot the bear so accurately in that arcade game.

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