

Tom, Thanks for Toy Story

February 19, 2020

TOY STORY (1995)

Directed by John Lasseter

Written by a lot of people

Starring Tim Allen, Erik von Detten & Tom Hanks as Woody the Cowboy

Pragmatism had a major role in our play-time. A byproduct of our closeness to the boys across the street was an all-way understanding of how to efficiently maximize fun, while considering everyone's preferences and proclivities. For the better part of a decade, we stood in the driveway and lobbed undefended baskets and noodled on Razor scooters, while trying to agree on the perfect adventures for the afternoons ahead. Our charts of the battlefield were a long stretch of hot pavement, our pins and red yarns were the thick cylinders of chalk you buy in tote boxes at Toys R Us. My presumed-endless youth's main passtime was planning things out with my buddies, setting things up with my buddies, talking things through with my buddies, and in a rare instance of knowing a moment's rarity, we fully understood the ever-inward wrap around our imaginations' spools. Our world was enormous.

But I was also pretty great at keeping *myself* busy, and maybe that's why I've always so deeply loved Toy Story, which features two unsimilar young boys, both of whom appear happy to bide the hours playing alone. With that in mind, I think an injustice is present in the superficial reception of this movie, and I'd like to get it out in the open: Sid Phillips is not the villain of Toy Story, leave the poor kid alone. Let's look at the nuance. Sid and Andy are next-door neighbouring children, of close age, who are depicted in decisive contrast; one is gentle with his toys, the other plays quite rough; one has a supportive mother, the other's mother screams about Pop Tarts; one literally wears a white shirt, the other wears black. But they're alike in their family dynamics (younger sisters, absent fathers), age-range and locale, and their common demonstration of having broad and eager imaginations. They both love to play and yet there's no indication that they ever play together. Could this be due to an interference from one of the aforementioned mothers? I suspect it's not Sid's mother because she doesn't appear to have much, if any, involvement in her son's activity in general (ie. he sleeps in his clothes and mail-orders explosives). Considering all angles, isn't it possible Sid is, in fact, a terribly lonely child?

Sid could gain a lot from Andy's friendship, and yet they do not associate. The only explanation I can conjure is that Andy's mother doesn't want her son being influenced by the vulgar boy next door - in fact, she's moving her family away from that street all together. And before we villify Mom, let's remember how often we've made the same ignorant judgements about Sid and his choice passtime of dismantling and rearranging the parts of his toys. As outsiders with a full scope of Toy Story's world, we know this enterprise brings trauma to the toys themselves, but let's not forget, Sid does not know the toys are sentient, and when he learns otherwise, his demeanour instantly changes. Up until then, Sid has just been keeping himself busy, and in that pursuit, the toys have brought him every bit as much amusement as Andy's toys bring him.

Thank you for indulging this rant. But yeah... Justice for Sid.

The real villain of Toy Story is jealousy, and it arises through Woody's deeply human fear of being forgotten. Woody the Cowboy has been Andy's favourite toy since kinderten, which has earned him a leadership role among the other toys. But his status is challenged when a birthday yields a flashy new action figure called Buzz Lightyear, and suddenly Andy's attention is redirected. Woody finds this especially frustrating because Buzz, who's fresh out of the package, genuinely believes himself to be a crash-landed space ranger, and will not accept his identity as Andy's toy. A chain of accidents happen wherein Woody and Buzz are lost, and then ultimately trapped in Sid's den of *non-malicious* torture, and they're forced to put aside their differences in order to survive the long journey home. Through this, both characters complete a poignant arc of acceptance. All of this is achieved in 77 minutes, by the way - what an absolute treat.

Toy Story was, in every way, a triumph in its era. It was the first feature film to be made entirely on computers, and you can refer to my thoughts on The Polar Express for an example of how experimental animation can fail. But the creative pedigree was a recipe for genius, and the fact that it remains endearing and enduring is a landmark for the relationship between art and commerce. Granted, there is evidence of the technology's infancy: in particular, note the wide aerial shot that reveals a landscape beyond the Dinoco gas station, after Woody and Buzz are left behind.

It's raw, and we've come a long way since. In terms of writing, Toy Story perfected the balance of a cogent fairytale for children that also rewards adult viewers with subtly-tailored mature comedy. "One minute you're defending the whole galaxy, then suddenly you're sucking down darjeeling with Marie Antoinette and her little sister." I mean, who among us can't relate?

The delight of watching Toy Story as a grown-up is sort of a meta-commentary on the themes of the film itself. It's like visting an old friend and being reintroduced to the vast imagination that was once unimpeded by cynical outlooks, like the probable neglect of Sid Phillips or the suspicion that Pizza Planet was a filthy filthy restaurant. It's nice to be reminded that, not so long ago, it was all about play. And full disclosure, my childhood in the driveway was, for the most part, fairly pure, but it might have included a few instances of melting green army men with a magnifying glass. I'm not such a bad guy, am I?

Thx!

PS. Toy Story features a tertiary character named Bo Peep, who's a porcelain doll affixed to a toddler's nightlight. She's inconsequential to the narrative, and this *will* matter later.