

Tom, Thanks for Big

November 6, 2019

BIG (1988)

Directed by Penny Marshall

Written by Gary Ross & Anne Spielberg

Starring Elizabeth Perkins, Jared Rushton, & Tom Hanks as Josh Baskin

Those final autumns, as woods-stomping pups, felt the same as always. We went on with standing plans to meet up again later, and kick a can while swapping Xbox brags and dreaming of the future; a future of teflon, unyielding to the lurking sharp edges of experience. *Someday* was always perfect, the way those damp and foggy evenings are perfect in my memory now. We see each other as much as can be expected of the busy and focussed, but I can't shake the guilty feeling that the days between reunions are betrayals of a commitment we never thought we had to make. That's why we long for when we were smaller; it's so much easier than when the rest of the world is. But time did its thing and transitioned us so smoothly we'd barely notice. The cans at once recycled, our woodland paths well beaten, the space went down down, baby, down down the roller coaster, and we let each other go.

But it wasn't reckless to share those dreams. It's normal to fantasize, and idealize another time. It's essential we enter these junctures with the grace of nature and not by impulse. If total adulthood activated like a simple wish granted, we'd be terrified. Josh must have been terrified when instantaneous adulthood rendered him alone in the city, furniture barricading the thin door of his rented room. Before being chased off by his frightened, knife-wielding mother, he was just a pre-growth-spurt school boy, with loyalty only to the essentials: computer games, comic books, and his best pal Billy. Strip away the comedy and the giant keyboard, the premise of Big is chilling; thirteen year-old boy wishes he was big, wakes up a grown man, and is forced to play adulthood catch-up (career, home, romance), using the instincts of someone his own age.

But that's kind of what growing up feels like. It's gradual, but it feels so sudden. In that spirit, we have a delightfully relatable fairytale, featuring one of the original complex TH performances, in which he not only captures childhood innocence in himself, he makes us feel it too. Granted, Big leaves many questions unanswered. How much time is passing while Josh is away from home? Tracking down the Zoltar machine that cursed him is expected to take six weeks, but in this time, he interviews for a job, gets said job, is promoted to vice president, endures multiple pay cycles, upgrades from one apartment to another, and begins a disconcerting love affair. Incidentally, one of the questions this film does see fit to answer is *Would you fall in love with a child if the child didn't look like a child?* Not for nothing, they decide on *yes*, which is objectionable enough before they incorporate an honest to goodness love scene.

I'm also left wondering about the lack of an investigation. Josh goes missing, but his mother did have a face-to-face encounter with the man she believes kidnapped him. Meanwhile, this unusual toy marketing prodigy's been cutting a rug at a nearby firm, to which he applied using a handwritten resume and a social security number he made up. Look, where there are sinister magic carnivals, there needn't be detectives. In fact, the story-teller doesn't break any of his/her own rules, and it's nearly impossible to make such a sweet children's movie that's secretly for adults.

A real MVP was whomever made the music choices. The climactic montage, when Josh realizes the rush of the business world can never replace his unfulfilled youth, is set to a gentle instrumental of David Pomeranz's *It's In Every One Of Us*, a song about the implicity of innocence. It's a gorgeous song but it doesn't hold a candle to the choice that was Big's other significant music-moment - the iconic FAO Schwartz keyboard dance. Josh and his boss join in a charming duet of the piano-lesson standard *Heart and Soul*, a song that (hear me out) might even justify the icky tryst involving Elizabeth Perkins later on. *Heart and soul, I fell in love with you*. She's drawn to his purity within, and a virtue so often callused in grown-ups, if not all together drained. It almost passes the cringe test, but then it comes out that he's thirteen and she's like, "Maybe you should hang on to my number." Oh well.

There's another film of this era which follows a similar plot; tired of childhood invisibility, kid makes a rash wish that things will change overnight, and ultimately learns that being a kid's not so bad, in fact, it might just give you the spark you need to stand out in this cynical world. The difference is that Josh probably goes on to clean *up* in

high school, sweet talk lots of ladies, and crush it in the workforce; Kevin McAllister might well grow up to harvest human organs. In both cases, the take-away is that one shouldn't wish away any part of their precious life, because once you move on, there's no going back.

Only, I'm not sure I believe that. We used to say we'd always live on the same street, share open-door policies, and carpools. We said it, we meant it, we stole our mothers' credit. But we were never in the position to decide what's what of another time. The best we can do is promise not to let each other go, and vigorously work our way back when we inevitably let it slip. We're cool, we're hot, it's always going to be that way. It's in every one of us. I don't see why we can't go back, and stomp down the woodland debris once again. A couple years ago, TH was approached by a life-long fan, and asked to join in a recitation of Josh and Billy's ice-cream rhyme from Big. Hanks remembered every word. We only have to grow up if we want to. Who's to say we can't grow down, on a wish, just the same?

Thx!