



James McAvoy and Christina Ricci

Penelope

Directed by: Mark Palansky
Screenplay by: Leslie Caveny
Based on book by Marilyn Kaye

Cast: Christina Ricci, James McAvoy,
Catherine O'Hara, Peter Dinklage,
Richard E. Grant, Reese Witherspoon,
Simon Woods

Rating: PG

Running Time: 101 minutes

Screen Savor Movie Review: Penelope

Opening February 29

Various theaters

By Kimberly Gadette

February 29, 2008

Once upon a *swine*, a beautiful blonde actress who hailed from the faraway land of Tinseltown, Southern California, set out to produce her very own movie. (Being that the story bespoke of the curly tail/tale of a closeted pig-girl, the actress recommended that the film be rated "PG.") She hired a disillusioned television writer and a first-time director.

But fairy tales being what they are, the journey was a challenge. Though the actress completed the project in 2006, it took two more years for the film's heralded unveiling in movie palaces throughout the countryside. Was it worth the wait? Heavens, yes — just like the film itself, the Happy Ending is, as one would expect, *obl*igatory.

Produced by Reese Witherspoon, the film recounts the tale of Penelope Wilhern (Christina Ricci), born into a loving, wealthy family that suffers from a curse. As the first-born daughter in decades, she is afflicted with an inoperable pig's snout and ears. The only way to break the curse is to find true love with "one of her own kind."

Hence, the Wilherns attempt to hog-tie any eligible blueblood they can snare. But even Penelope's sizeable piggy bank cannot attract a proper suitor. Or can it? Along comes the threadbare yet pedigreed gambler Max (James McAvoy), who seems to have a propensity for spam over steak. In other words, he may not be as *stymied* as the others.

Speaking of *stymie*-free, it is often the case that new writers and directors aren't all that impressive in their fledgling outings. Not so with screenwriter Leslie Caveny and director Mark Palansky. The dialogue is sharp, funny and sometimes appropriately wistful; the scenes are well-paced against a heightened, brightened cityscape; the music is augmented with just the right tone — perhaps, one might say, a tasty blending of sweet and sour.

Even better, the performances are far from *boaring*. As the swinemakers — er, parents — Richard E. Grant and Catherine O'Hara are delectable. Ms. O'Hara's controlling, over-protective mama is instantly recognizable, a martyr sacrificing all for the betterment of her young...whether or not said babe desires such sacrifice. This mama's mantra: "Remember: You are not your nose."

Enter two pig-headed villains: a one-eyed photographer with a grudge (Peter Dinklage's Lemon) and a slightly unbalanced ex-suitor (Simon Woods' Edward). They attempt to cash in on the girl's misfortune by snapping her snout and sizeable ears, ergo trying to make a silk purse from a sow's ear. Edward, who is truly one blanket short of the proverbial pig in a blanket, sinks into a rapid, rabid porcine-a-phobia — as opposed to Lemon, evolving by film's end, written with surprising depth.

And then there's Ms. Piggy's courtship with McAvoy's Max, the man who makes her insides sizzle. Their early scenes, playing chess while a one-way mirror runs interference, *pigging* out a tune on a piano, are deceptively breezy. A modern-day nod to fleshless dating (i.e. the internet), there's something to be said for hearing the heart before facing the face. It's a bit jarring to see McAvoy sans his proper English duds, but even with bitten nails, greasy hair and an air of desperation, his Max still touts plenty of animal appeal.

As for the lass herself, she conveys strength and vulnerability, inner resolve and outer naiveté. A pearl of a piglet versus a hoggish world. Given that a garish muffler covers up the majority of her face in the film's second half, the task of acting solely with her eyes doesn't exactly allow for an excess of pork. In short: Ricci gives one heck of a USDA-approved performance.

Even the beautiful blonde actress/producer Witherspoon shows up in a smaller role, a bacon bit versus a hambone. Playing a tougher cut than usual, she, too, adds to the appetizing whole.

This movie is an infrequent treat, these days of swine and roses. Enjoy.

Snout it out: This picture is sure to bring squeals of sheer delight.