

*Spirited Away*

Rated PG

Runtime: 2 hrs 5 min.

Reviewed by Cade Carver

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*Spirited Away* is an animated film written and directed by Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki. Released in Japan in 2001 with an English-language version soon following in 2002, it tells the story of a ten-year-old girl named Chihiro, separated from her parents after taking a shortcut in the woods en route to their new home. Upon entering a mysterious tunnel, poor Chihiro's parents are transformed into pigs after they consume unattended food meant for the gods. Chihiro soon encounters a boy named Haku who warns her she must get a job at the spirit bathhouse, lest she be forced to join her parents in the pigpen.

What follows is a surreal, occasionally disorienting, and mind-bendingly imaginative down-the-rabbit-hole story in the tradition of Carrol's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Baum's *Wizard of Oz*.

*Spirited Away* takes place primarily in the astonishing bathhouse, a kind of vacation resort for spirits looking to unwind. "It's where they come to replenish themselves," croaks Yubaba, the giant-headed witch who runs the place. With the help of Lin, a humanoid spirit (most inhabitants of the bathhouse either look like frog-men or bizarrely proportioned female spirits,) Chihiro must descend into the lower levels of the bathhouse for a terrifying meeting with the spiteful old witch and beg for a job, in one of the movie's best scenes. You're lucky you've never had a job interview like this; humans are despised in this realm of gods and spirits, and Yubaba is nasty and threatening throughout much of the film, an antagonist worthy of a Grimm Fairy Tale. When her giant, germophobic baby named Boh is woken from his nap and starts throwing a tantrum and destroying her office, Yubaba shoes Chihiro away in exchange for giving her a job.

Luckily for Chihiro, she may now stay in the spirit realm and figure out how to get herself and her parents back to the other side. Unluckily, in signing the contract, Chihiro has also signed away her name. She must now go as Sen. Haku warns Chihiro not to forget her real name, and that if she does forget, she will have no chance of rescuing her parents and returning to the human world.

Voice director Kirk Wise (*Beauty and the Beast*, *Hunchback of Notre Dame*) does an admirable job of overseeing the English Language dub of the film, which stars Daveigh Chase (*Lilo and*

*Stitch*) as Chihiro, Susan Egan (*Hercules*) as Lin, Jason Marsden (*A Goofy Movie*) as Haku, and Suzanne Pleshette (*The Bob Newhart Show*) as the villain Yubaba. Also featured are David Ogden Stiers (*Beauty and the Beast*) as Kamaji the boiler man with many arms, Pixar regular John Ratzenberger (*Cheers, Toy Story*) as one of the grotesque, frog-like workers of the bathhouse, and Tara Strong (*Fairly Odd Parents*) as Boh, Yubaba's beloved giant baby. Though young Daveigh Chase delivers the occasional stilted line as our hero, the cast largely rise to the task of overdubbing a film which had already been animated.

The real star of the film is writer/director Hayao Miyazaki (*Kiki's Delivery Service, Princess Mononoke*.) Every frame is a work of well-observed detail and visual beauty, from the towering bathhouse, full of hot steam and long, secretive corridors, to the one-way train which glides silently across the surface of the water, to the spirits themselves – some favorites of mine include the “radish spirit” and the human-sized chicks (baby chickens) which resemble walking, chirping marshmallow peeps, as well as Haku, a boy with magical powers, mysterious motivations and an unnerving habit of transforming into a fierce sea-dragon.

For some, the slightly stuttering nature of the Japanese hand-drawn animation will take some getting used to, as it's not the buttery smooth movement you typically get in an American animated film. However, even that aspect takes on a life of its own; just look at the way water is poured, or the way steam billows up into the air, or the way the clothes and hair of the characters react to the wind, the crackling, sparking flames of the coal furnace in the boiler room. It's remarkably elaborate and detailed movement; Miyazaki and his animators have a keen eye for these things.

To watch this film is to experience the visceral, disorienting sensation of a dream come to life, shifting reality beneath our feet and leaving us in the company of a small girl, a classic fairy-tale heroine, who starts the story way in over her head. She's stuck in this frightening yet fascinating world and so are we. We navigate through it, one step at a time, along with Chihiro, and by the end, we've had so much fun we may not want to leave. The film is by turns funny, frightening, bizarre, and moving, and Miyazaki weaves these tones together effortlessly; what we're seeing is a filmmaker in complete control of his artistic vision.

Unlike so many other films in the fantasy genre, this one doesn't hit you over the head with multiple scene of dry exposition explaining what this world is and how it works. The film trusts its audience to use their imagination and fill in some of the blanks. There is more than enough conflict and character development to keep us invested, but the film is mysterious and powerful because it doesn't spoon feed us the answers.

This is my favorite movie of all time because of the writing and the directing, the spine-tingling score by longtime Miyazaki collaborator Joe Hisaishi (*Porco Rosso, Ponyo*), and the

overwhelming emotions that wash over me each time I watch it. It's as close to a perfect piece of fantasy filmmaking as I can imagine with raw, untamed imagination and a profoundly empathetic beating heart. Miyazaki, along with his editor, sound team, his army of animators at Studio Ghibli and the entire crew, create a world more richly realized, more alive and full of working parts than any other fictional setting in film that I have seen, animated or otherwise.

10/10 stars

This film is available on DVD in the Marshall District Library collection as well as on DVD or Blu-Ray through MeLCat. Please contact the Help Desk for more information: 269.781.7821 x10.