

Magical spirits

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [October 9, 2002](#) issue

The world Hayao Miyazaki conjures up in the Japanese animated feature *Spirited Away* is so exotic and in a state of such constant metamorphosis that you may have the impression, as you stagger out of the theater, that you've watched the entire movie with your mouth open. *Spirited Away* runs close to two hours, and there isn't a banal image in it.

Miyazaki came to the consciousness of American audiences with the magnificent *Princess Mononoke* (1997), an ecological fable in which the archetypal set-up--a young hero is wounded by a maddened beast and must begin a long journey to seek the cure--leads, unpredictably, to a struggle to resurrect the forest spirit whose life force has been devastated by the thoughtless assaults of humankind. It's a fairy tale with a Hans Christian Andersen imprint: a tone of mournful wonder.

Spirited Away is even more remarkable. The heroine is a young girl named Chihiro (voiced by Daveigh Chase). As the picture begins, she is moving with her parents into a new neighborhood. When her dad misses the turn-off and chances an improvised shortcut, they dead-end at a peeling archway. As they stand at this entrance to a long, dark tunnel, the girl has the distinct impression that the wind is drawing them in.

What they find when they emerge on the other side is an abandoned amusement park. While her parents quickly locate a restaurant stocked with mounds of fresh meat and recklessly dig in, Chihiro explores the streets, which seem less empty as the afternoon light fades: inky silhouettes move listlessly through the buildings as she walks warily past. By the time she encounters a young man named Haku, who warns her to escape before dark, it's too late. Her parents' voraciousness has transformed them into grunting pigs, and a river now separates her from the world she once knew.

Haku takes her to a bathhouse where spirits come to replenish their powers; it's run by a tyrannical witch named Yubaba (Suzanne Pleshette). Chihiro's only hope for escape, for herself and her parents, is to work her way out--a task that seems

impossible when Yubaba, her crooked fingers tugging at the signature on her contract, steals her name and forces a new identity on her. Moreover, she learns that Haku is Yubaba's henchman, and not to be trusted.

Like many other child adventurers, Chihiro develops courage and ingenuity, and takes unexpected consolation from nonhuman strangers, especially sassy Rin and the boiler man Kamajii (David Ogden Stiers), a mustachioed creature with six elastic arms who blinks kindly at her through tiny smoked glasses. More important, she learns to look beneath the surface of things. The tacit motto of *Spirited Away* is "Nothing is ever what it seems," and Miyazaki's phantasmagoric images furnish proof.

In one magical sequence, Yubaba sends Chihiro to serve a stink spirit whose squishy march to the bath leaves deposits of glutinous mud at every step. The girl applies enough herbal soap to dissolve the spirit's encrusted mire and soothes its pain by pulling from its side what turns out to be a rusty pile of ingested debris. Cleansed, the creature turns out to be a river spirit who floats out of the bathhouse like a winged dragon (though it looks more like a marvelous flying snake).

You can spot the borrowings here from *Pinocchio*, *Androcles and the Lion*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Alice in Wonderland* and many others. (I didn't recognize the Asian sources, but no doubt there are plenty.) Great fairy tales invariably carry their legacy around with them; part of the magic is always in how the latest sorcerers have stirred the elements together. With the exception of *Lord of the Rings*, movies haven't produced a sorcerer of Miyazaki's stature since Steven Spielberg and Carroll Ballard (*The Black Stallion*) came on the scene in the 1970s.

Though *Spirited Away* is cheerier than *Princess Mononoke*, there's a plaintive quality to some of the visuals that haunts you. A black ghost with a face like an Indian mask hovers in the rain outside the bathhouse until Chihiro takes pity on him and admits him. This "no-face," as he's called, has a monstrous side that takes over in the bathhouse, but he's puppyishly devoted to Chihiro, and she's able to cure him of his appetites. When Haku is mortally wounded and she departs on a quest for his cure, No-Face accompanies her, sitting silently next to her on a train that glides across the river on a submerged track. This mysterious image, simultaneously bespeaking an aching lonesomeness and a salvific camaraderie, is the most affecting moment on the screen this year.