

Animated summer

by [Matthew Prins](#) in the [August 2, 2000](#) issue

*Chicken Run* (2000)

*Titan A.E.* (2000)

*Fantasia/2000* (1999)

Summer provides a glut of movies aimed at school-age children. Some excellent films can fit this category, such as last year's *Toy Story 2* (released in the fall, actually) and, from two years ago, *Babe: Pig in the City*. *Chicken Run*, the British claymation homage to *The Great Escape* (1963), comes close to that kind of artistry. The adeptness and occasional brilliance of the film come not from outright lunacy--which co-director Nick Park used to great effect in his Wallace and Gromit shorts--but from an intelligence and imagination not often seen in recent animated offerings.

Though the plot of *Chicken Run* is well worn, and the film is prosaic in the treatment of its romantic subplot (and in other obligatory film conventions, including featuring Mel Gibson as The Star to Help Our Film Make Money in America), it breaks out of the commonplace at lots of moments: with a hen frantically trying to cut a string of Christmas lights with safety scissors, the foreboding way Mrs. Tweedy calls her husband "Mr. Tweedy," chicken calisthenics, pervasive dry British wit, a brute of a pie-making apparatus, and many more moments that I'm still giggling over. And forget about the digital revolution: the quaint, earthy animation style of *Chicken Run* is more endearing and magical than any contemporary Disney cartoon, including the realism achieved in *Dinosaur* and parts of *Toy Story 2*.

Most animated movies don't hang together particularly well, possibly because most are more focused on producing fantastic moments than making the entire production gel. *Titan A.E.* falls short on both counts. The mundane story line doesn't help: Cale (Matt Damon) is mildly unhappy because 15 years earlier Earth was destroyed by the evil Drej. At that time, the Drej also killed Cale's father, who was a scientist working on a whispered-about ship called Titan. A map magically appears on Cale's hand (there's something science fictionish here about DNA encoded in a ring), and he and his friends follow it for the next 70 minutes of screentime to get to

Titan.

The worst aspect of the film is the awkward juxtaposition of traditional and digital animation. Close behind are the simpleminded storytelling and the perfunctory dialogue that almost seems dubbed. (The film's look is vaguely reminiscent of the Japanese animation style Anime, particularly in how much more detailed the background is than the foreground.) Usually it's unnerving to hear well-known actors' voices coming out of animated figures, but trying to figure which celebrity speaks which monotonous part ("Is that Janeane Garafolo?") is one of this film's chief entertainments. Twentieth Century-Fox has tried to gain ground on Disney in the animation arena, but after the dismal showing of *Titan A.E.* it decided to close down its Phoenix animation studio.

Disney, for its part, isn't interested in relinquishing the animation crown. Fox's first animated film, *Anastasia* in 1997, was met at the box office by a re-release of Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. In response to *Titan A.E.*, the mouse moved *Fantasia/2000* from IMAX theaters to the multiplexes. I saw *Fantasia/2000* early in its IMAX run, and it was surprisingly lackluster. Only one sequence, featuring four interlocking stories in a line-drawn New York with "Rhapsody in Blue" as the musical backdrop, deserves the ubiquitous Disney label of masterpiece. The original *Fantasia* may be more pretentious, but it's also more satisfying. Think how audacious it was in 1940 to stage the clash between the profane and sacred in 14 minutes of animation. The closing sequence in the original *Fantasia* (set to "A Night on Bald Mountain" and "Ave Maria") offers a hopeful image of redemption from the powers of sin. *Fantasia/2000* has a religious sequence, too: a kitschy retelling of the story of Noah's ark (Donald Duck plays Noah) set to "Pomp and Circumstance." The first sequence spoke to me of how merciful God is for absolving my transgressions. The latter made me wonder which animals graduated cum laude.