

It Runs in the Family



Producers Richard and Lili Fini Zanuck hold up their Oscars after their film *Driving Miss Daisy* won the Best Picture award. Photo Credit: Blake Sell/REUTERS/NewsCom (3/26/90)

A Tribute to Richard D. Zanuck by Jarrod Emerson

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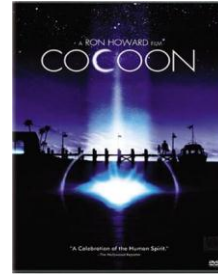
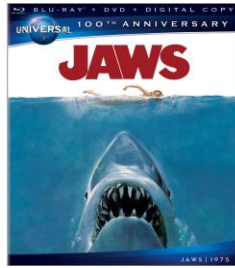
As I read through the many obituaries written about Richard D. Zanuck, I found it interesting that nearly every one mentioned that he had been hired, and then fired, by his father – the venerable Darryl F. Zanuck. The elder Zanuck, for those who are too young to remember, achieved his own zenith as a co-founder of 20th Century Fox back in the mid-30's. I wondered, "Was the firing (actually through the studio board, but backed by Zanuck Sr.) a purely business decision? Was it personal? A father's jealousy?" In the end, I decided the reason really didn't matter – Richard D. Zanuck recovered magnificently.

At the start of the 1970's, he formed his own production company with the late David Brown, with whom he would co-produce several of his biggest projects. Throughout his career, Zanuck made a practice of consistently pushing young talent to the forefront, such as when he co-produced the first two features of a young man named Steven Spielberg. Over the next four decades, Zanuck would go on to work with several directors as Bruce Beresford, Ron Howard, and in recent years, Tim Burton, whose projects he produced until his death on July 13, 2012.

While few producers are household names, Richard D. Zanuck fully deserves that title – for the sheer diversity of his work and for helping new generations of directors explode onto the scene. It was with great pleasure that I watched or re-watched the following Zanuck-produced films for this tribute:

Big Fish
Charlie & the Chocolate Factory
Cocoon
Driving Miss Daisy
Jaws
Planet of the Apes
The Sugarland Express

I highly recommend the following Zanuck-produced films >>>>>



JAWS 1975, ★★★★★ High season is ramping up in the coastal resort of Amity and the town folk are eagerly awaiting the rush of tourists – and their money. The sun is shining, the beaches are warming, and the cool Atlantic tides are beckoning. Ah, but things aren't as quite as rosy as they seem. A rogue great white shark is lurking offshore, picking off townies and tourists alike! Police Chief “Martin Brody” (Roy Scheider), is desperate to convince the town council that the shark does exist and the beaches must be closed. The mayor (et al) are desperate to keep the attacks quiet so that the tourist season won't be a bust. Before you know it, Brody (who suffers from aquaphobia) is setting out with grizzled fisherman, “Quint” (Robert Shaw), and marine biologist, “Matt Hooper” (Richard Dreyfuss), with plans to exterminate the beast.

Talk about making a hell of a splash! Zanuck's second collaboration with Steven Spielberg (along with production partner David Brown) *literally* made an entire generation fear beaches, swimming pools, and even bathtubs. But, *Jaws* also influenced an entire wave of future filmmakers. Despite malfunctioning sharks, bitter actors, and a ballooning budget (which were only a few of the problems that Spielberg and company had to deal with), Zanuck and Brown kept their trust in Spielberg and supported him to the end.

Every aspect of *Jaws* still works to near perfection, such as the incredible use of suspense, the fast-paced editing, POV shots, and John Williams' infamous cello-cue (dum-dum-dum-dum /dum-dum-dum-dum) that has been parodied by everybody but “Weird Al” Yankovic. However, the real treasure of *Jaws* is the witty chemistry shared between the three leads. Once Brody, Hooper and Quint set sail, we are treated to non-stop banter, tension – and yes – male-bonding. Three vastly different characters are marvelously brought to life, particularly the Ahab-like Quint, as played by the late Robert Shaw. And, despite the finale's implausibility, I have yet to meet a person that wasn't on the edge of (or under) his or her seat!

BIG FISH 2003, ★★★★★ “Ed Bloom” (Albert Finney) and his fantastical anecdotes entertained many, but they frustrated his son, “Will” (Billy Crudup), who stopped speaking to his father altogether. Three years later, Will and his wife, “Josephine” (Marion Cotillard), return home upon learning that Ed is terminally ill. In caring for his father, Will desperately tries to reconnect with him. However, that may require the son to believe in things he never did before, as Ed recalls his incredible life as a young man (played by Ewan McGregor).

Based on Daniel Wallace's novel, *Big Fish* was the second Tim Burton film to be produced by Richard Zanuck, and the result is one of the finest for both men. Fantasy characters, scary creatures, a Danny Elfman score, Helena Bonham Carter, and Danny DeVito, are just some of the Burton trademarks to be found here. However, at no point does it feel routine. *Big Fish* is first and foremost a wonderful reconciliation tale, with delightful fantasy elements scattered throughout. This is one of Tim Burton's most mature stories, but it manages to retain the child-like imagination so characteristic of all his films.

Always-enjoyable Albert Finney is marvelous as the elderly "Ed Bloom", a man who holds onto his passion for life to the very end. Finney and Billy Crudup build a very believable and emotional father-son story. Ewan McGregor is enjoyably charming and energetic as the younger Ed, and he is clearly having fun with the impressive roster of character actors like Steve Buscemi, Deep Roy, and Missi Pyle. *Big Fish* is a very well balanced blend of drama and fantasy with a finale that may move many to tears.

DRIVING MISS DAISY 1989, ★★★★★ Aging Jewish widow, "Daisy Werthan" (Jessica Tandy), is loth to admit that she badly needs a driver. Her concerned son, "Boolie" (Dan Aykroyd), hires "Hoke Colburn" (Morgan Freeman) as her new chauffer. Despite Daisy's initial resistance, she eventually warms up to Hoke, and we watch as an incredible friendship builds over the years.

Adapted by Alfred Uhly from his stage play, *Driving Miss Daisy* is an inspired story of friendship blossoming when we least expect it. The two lead characters slowly discover they not only have a lot in common, but that they need each other: Bit by bit, Daisy learns to accept her limits, while Hoke is taught by Daisy that it is never too late to try new things. They also learn to support each other as each are members of a minority surrounded by prejudice. Jessica Tandy and Morgan Freeman were both very deserving of their Academy Award nominations. (Tandy won for Best Actress.) The unusual choice of Dan Aykroyd as Boolie also works surprisingly well.

But the quality doesn't end at the performances. Richard & Lili Fini Zanuck and director Bruce Beresford assembled an amazing line of people behind the camera. Cinematographer Peter James creates a bright, colorful portrait of 1950's Georgia that glows beautifully. I particularly enjoyed Hans Zimmer's score, full of intimacy, yet peppered with upbeat cues. In all, *Driving Miss Daisy* won 4 Academy Awards including Best Picture, and I feel Zanuck fully deserved it.

CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY 2005, ★★★★★☆ Despite the rumors that swirl around town, chocolate-maker "Willy Wonka" (Johnny Depp) has managed to keep a low profile. That is, until he places five golden tickets in random candy bars and announces that the winners will be treated to a tour of the factory. Even better, one will be given a lifetime supply of chocolate. The winners include the gluttonous "Augustus Gloop" (Philip Weigratz), spoiled princess "Veruca Salt" (Julia Winter), gum-chewing overachiever "Violet Beauregard" (Annasophia Robb), the videogame-addicted "Mike Tevee" (Jordan Fry), and poor, but good-natured "Charlie Bucket" (Freddie Highmore).

By the time this movie was made, millions of children (and quite a few adults) adored both the classic 1964 Roald Dahl novel and the 1971 musical adaptation. Skepticism surrounding this update was understandable, but undeserved. Burton's film is neither inferior nor superior: it's something else entirely. This newer version opts to stick closer to the source material while adding several clever touches, such as an amusing backstory with Willy Wonka and his dentist father (an amusing Christopher Lee cameo), or updating Mike Tevee's interest to violent videogames. Via modern special effects, Deep Roy portrays all the Oompa-Loompas. Each of their musical numbers is an amusing parody of genres ranging from hard rock to Bollywood. As for Willy Wonka himself, Johnny Depp wisely avoids attempting to replicate Gene Wilder's brilliantly psychotic performance while managing to create an equally strange individual. This third collaboration for Zanuck and Burton, was definitely a charm!

THE SUGARLAND EXPRESS 1974, ★★★★★☆

Frustrated young mother, “Lou Jean” (Goldie Hawn) impulsively hatches a plan to break her husband “Clovis” (William Atherton) out of prison – despite the fact that he has only a few more months of his sentence to serve. Lou Jean is desperate, as their child has been placed in foster care in a place called Sugarland. However, the fugitive couple find themselves in a more complicated situation than they expected, when they’re forced to take a hostage in patrolman “Slide” (Michael Sacks). Before long a fleet of officers led by “Captain Tanner” (Ben Johnson) is on their trail.

Richard D. Zanuck, along with co-producer David Brown, assembled an interesting creative team for the film: composer John Williams, cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond, and young actors Goldie Hawn and William Atherton. However, the most notable member of the group was a twenty-six year old director named Steven Spielberg, making his very first theatrical film.

Inspired by a true story, *The Sugarland Express* is one of the darker films in Spielberg’s vast body of work. Interestingly, it contains several themes that would become hallmarks of his career: “the family in jeopardy”, as seen through the eyes of Lou Jean (wonderfully played by Goldie Hawn), and the Clovis’ mad dash to reclaim their child. Unlike most of Spielberg’s outings, there are no straight-up villains or heroes – these characters are far more ambiguous. Lou Jean and Clovis are anti-heroes who are reluctant to harm anyone, yet think what they’re doing is justifiable. Meanwhile, Captain Tanner isn’t merely a run-of-the mill, ruthless Texas Ranger, but a veteran cop who changes his approach as he learns the couple’s motivations. Watching *The Sugarland Expresses* makes one yearn for more dry tales like this from Steven Spielberg.

COCOON 1985, ★★★★★☆

Retirement-home residents “Art” (Don Ameche), “Ben” (Wilford Brimley), and “Joe” (Hume Cronyn) have found the perfect escape – the swimming pool of an abandoned property next door. One day they arrive to discover that the property has been rented by a group of mysterious divers. Feelings of “we were here first” overcome good sense, and the geriatric gang continue to sneak in for a dip – despite the large, boulder-like objects now resting on the bottom of the pool. Suddenly, the “boys” begin experiencing some rather interesting “rejuvenating” effects of the water, and decide to share their good luck with their wives and a select friend or two. All is wonderful until an angry “Walter” (Brian Dennehy) – the man who has rented the property – discovers the group in the pool. Walter eventually divulges that the “divers” are actually visitors from the planet Anteria, and the boulders are really “cocoon” that contain long-lost friends they’ve come to rescue. But how long will the group be able to keep this “Fountain Of Youth” a secret? What could the consequences be?

An ambitious film, *Cocoon* blends drama, science fiction, and romance with a little comedy thrown in. To put it simply, there is a lot going on here, and I found it to be problematic. The movie sports a large cast of characters and contains several plotlines, making it feel a little too-thinly-spread as a result. While I found I cared most about the three old men, I wanted to see more of the young Steve Guttenberg and Thane Welch characters. Perhaps a smaller cast or a more polished script would’ve helped the film? Certain aspects of *Cocoon* have also dated pretty badly: Don Ameche’s breakdance number springs to mind.

But the film ultimately succeeds. Several of the performances, most notably Don Ameche’s and Brian Dennehy’s are very effective. There are a few emotionally dramatic moments, such as when bitter resident, “Bernie” (well played by Jack Gilford), attempts belatedly to use the “fountain of youth” for his dying wife. James Horner’s score is both emotional and cosmic, echoing the work he previously did with the *Star Trek* franchise. Despite a few shortcomings, I think *Cocoon* is still well worth checking out.

Although this film is ambitious and epic in scale, I cannot bring myself to recommend it:

PLANET OF THE APES 2001, ★★☆☆☆ Swept into a bizarre space storm, astronaut “Leo Davidson” (Mark Wahlberg) crashes on a mysterious planet several centuries in the future. The planet is ruled by a race of talking apes that has enslaved human beings. With the help of sympathetic chimpanzee “Ari” (Helena Bonham Carter), and a human slave “Daena” (Estella Warren), Leo spawns a revolt against the iron rule of the fascist “General Thedus” (Tim Roth).

Stuck in development hell for over a decade in the hands of several directors, this remake finally moved forward with Tim Burton at the helm. This was the first of several collaborations between Zanuck and Burton. But despite a number of gifted people on both sides of the camera, at no point does this remake even come close matching Franklin J. Schaffner’s 1968 classic. Wisely, *Planet of the Apes* does not replicate the story of the original, so there’s no attempt to repeat that film’s iconic, brilliant ending. However, the ending here makes about as much sense as vampires sparkling in sunlight! Rick Baker’s makeup, while impressive, cannot mask weak performances and a contrived plot. Thankfully, Burton turned down the opportunity to embark any further in this franchise, reportedly claiming he’d rather “jump out of a window.”

THE BOTTOM LINE:

Rather than merely following in his famous father’s footsteps, Richard D. Zanuck managed to create his own route. In the process, he helped to propel the careers of some of the biggest talents on today’s Hollywood scene. While he occasionally misfired, the vast majority of Zanuck’s projects have held up well.

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A graduate of Columbia College film school, JARROD EMERSON has been working with Films42.com since 2007. With interests ranging from screenwriting to improv, he is grateful to Jan and Rich for their support, and for giving him a reason/excuse to watch even more movies! The bottom line: There can never be too much cinema in Jarrod’s life!

FF2 Editor’s Note:

Although we have seen all of the films mentioned in this piece, we saw them before we began FF2, so, alas, most of them are not listed in our database. Therefore, we are very grateful to Jarrod for going back into the archive to create a personal record of the highpoints of Zanuck’s career.

We are especially pleased with Jarrod’s praise for the underrated *Big Fish* (only 77% “Fresh” on the Tomato-Meter) which appears in the top category of our Twozies List for 2003: http://www.films42.com/twozies/twozies_2003.asp