



Review

This image released by Disney shows Oakes Fegley in a scene from "Pete's Dragon." — AP

Florence Foster Jenkins: Tone-deaf but adored

When opera lovers ask New York's Carnegie Hall for souvenir concert programs, they're not usually interested in Maria Callas or Joan Sutherland. More often than not, the name they request is Florence Foster Jenkins, an American socialite who only appeared at the legendary venue once, and couldn't hold a note. "In order for a singer to succeed, they need to have a combination of talent, charisma, and interpretive quality," Carnegie's archives director Gino Francesconi wrote in a blogpost commemorating her life.

"And, by definition, they need to be able to sing. Florence Foster Jenkins had none of these attributes. In fact, she was considered one of the worst singers of all time." Jenkins, who craved fame as a diva but gained infamy for her terrible voice, is the subject of "Florence Foster Jenkins," a bittersweet biopic which hits US theaters this week, starring three-time Oscar winner Meryl Streep and Hugh Grant. "She almost gets it, and that's what I found delicious in her," Streep told the audience at a preview screening for the Paramount picture in Beverly Hills last week.

"I started listening to the recordings and I could feel her getting really excited and her thinking 'This is going very well,'" said the actress. Jenkins, who inherited a fortune from her father in 1909, had to give up her beloved piano due to nerve damage from syphilis contracted from her first husband when she was just a teenager. She used her wealth to indulge her passion for opera singing instead, putting on grand artistic soirees for polite society at the Ritz-Carlton, the Waldorf and other upscale Manhattan venues.

'Vanity'

Those who heard her-often acquaintances rather than paying members of the public-knew she was a terrible singer but none ever felt inclined to tell her. "It became a thing to do. You had to go and listen to Florence Foster screw up every song she attempted to sing," says Francesconi. She was persuaded to make her Carnegie Hall debut at the age of 76 on October 25, 1944 and walked onstage in flamboyant homemade costumes, throwing roses into the sell-out crowd. The concert went as poorly as had every other recital, but this time Jenkins was not among friends.

Henry Simon of the daily newspaper PM described the audience's laughter as "the crudest and least civilized behavior I have ever witnessed in Carnegie Hall." But a less charitable write-up in the Los Angeles Times described the performance as the "most pathetic exhibition of vanity I have ever seen." The singer's common-law husband, failed Shakespearean actor St Clair Bayfield hadn't approved of the concert, and wrote after her death that it had "turned out the fiasco I expected." "Afterward, when we went home, Florence was upset-and when she read the reviews, crushed. She had not known, you see," he added.

Diagnosed with heart strain, she died a month later. Directed by Stephen Frears ("Philomena," "The Queen"), the movie was shot in London and Liverpool, a city in northwestern England whose architecture is said to resemble that of 1940s Manhattan.

'Funny and moving'

"I thought it was a very special kind of gift, an adventure, to look into the life of someone who had no understanding of how she presented, except to hope that it went well," said Streep, 67. Grant-whose acting had taken a back seat to campaigning in Britain for tighter regulation of the country's famously rowdy tabloid press-was in semi-retirement, "having a baby a week, basically," when he was asked to play Bayfield.

"Stephen, who I knew a bit through the politics, started to make noises about a film. I thought he was joking and then suddenly this script appeared on my desk from him," said the actor, who has fathered four children since turning 50. "Not only was it funny and moving, but it was also directed by him-his quite classy-and Meryl bloody Streep was going to be in it so I absolutely had to say yes." —AFP



This file photo taken on April 12, 2016 shows US actress Meryl Streep (left) and British actor Hugh Grant as they arrive for the premiere of "Florence Foster Jenkins" in London. — AFP

'Pete's Dragon' (pleasantly) stays earthbound

After an exhausting summer buffet of set pieces, superheroes and whatever s-word you might use for "Suicide Squad," the gentle "Pete's Dragon" is a welcome palate cleanser. Where other summer movies are chest-thumping, it's quiet; where others are brashly cynical, it's sweetly sincere; where others are lacking in giant cuddly dragons, "Pete's Dragon" has one. Few may remember the 1977 Disney original, in which a young boy's best friend was a bubbly dragon invisible to others. As part of Disney's continuing effort to remake its animated classics in live-action, "Pete's Dragon" has been confidently reborn as an earnest tale of green-winged wonder.

David Lowery, a veteran of the independent film world and the director of the lyrical crime drama "Ain't Them Bodies Saints," inherits a far bigger film. But his "Pete's Dragon" still maintains the homespun feel of an American fable. Spielberg-light, you might call it. The film begins, in the "Bambi" tradition, in parental tragedy. Pete's family is driving through a remote Pacific Northwest forest with Pete nestled in the back-seat of the station wagon, reading a children's book about a dog named Elliott. A deer sprints out and, in poetic slow-

motion, the gravity of the car's interior is upended. The car flips off the road and Pete staggers from the crash.

Flashing forward six years, Pete (Oakes Fegley) is a wild 10-year-old orphan living in the woods alone except for his magical companion, the dragon Elliott. As far as CGI creatures go, Elliott is an irresistible one. Furry as a fairway, he's like an enormous emerald-green puppy. Far from the "Game of Thrones" dragon variety, he's more adept at chasing his own tail than breathing fire. He's also the subject of local folklore, mostly as told by Robert Redford's wood-carving storyteller.

Magic and family and faith

But it's his forest ranger daughter Grace (Bryce Dallas Howard) that first encounters Elliott and ultimately leads to the dragon's discovery. Grace coaxes Elliott back into society and into the fold of her family. She has a daughter, Natalie (Oona Laurence) and lumber mill-running husband Jack (Wes Bentley). It's the push by a logging company - where Jack's brother, Gavin (Karl Urban) is a gun-totting lumberjack - into the forest that simultaneously begins flushing out Pete and Elliott from their home in the trees. The lush forest (New

Zealand, again, subbing for North America) reigns over "Pete's Dragon," a tale scored with soft bluegrass and exuding an environment-friendly love for the beautiful and exotic splendors of nature. When competing interests come for Elliott, they are really fighting for the soul of the forest.

There are Spielbergian gestures here of magic and family and faith, perhaps better orchestrated than Spielberg's own recent try at a Disney film, "The BFG." But it's missing a spark, a sense of danger and maybe a little humor. The lean simplicity of "Pete's Dragon" is its greatest attribute and its weakness. It doesn't quite achieve liftoff until the film's final moments. But it does at last catch flight, finally soaring beyond its humble folksiness. "Pete's Dragon," a Walt Disney Co release, is rated PG by the Motion Picture Association of America for "action, peril and brief language." Running time: 103 minutes. Three stars out of four. — AP



'The Exorcist' TV producers explain the connections to the iconic film

"The Exorcist" TV series that Fox will unveil this fall takes place in the same universe occupied by the iconic William Friedkin film, producers said at the Television Critics Association panel for the show. The drama, which premieres Sept 23, takes place in Chicago, 40 years after the events depicted in the film. There will be nods to the original, including occasional use of the Mike Oldfield composition "Tubular Bells" — though the TV "Exorcist" won't be able to use it too often, because it's a not a cheap song to license, according to executive producer and director Rupert Wyatt. "We never set out to use it," Wyatt said. But eventually, after a bit of prodding, the producers "tried it at the end of the [pilot] cut, and we realized that it worked."

Related Fox Chiefs Talk Reboots, 'X-Files' Future and Strains of Peak TV Era "If you can earn something through the story," then it should go in, he said. "It was always our intent not to just plaster it on for the sake of homage." In another scene, there is mention of the priests who appeared in the film, noted executive producer Jeremy Slater. "It was important to let everyone know that this is a continuation of an existing story," said Slater. Those acknowledgements are in the first episode, and they're there in part to indicate that decades have passed, and audience members should not expect Fathers Karras and Merrin to "show up" at the home of the Rance family, whose plight occupies much of the ten-episode first season.

Evil insinuating

Slater, Wyatt and the cast noted that one of their biggest goals was to carry over the grounded tone and realistic atmosphere of the first "Exorcist" film. Wyatt, who directed the pilot, noted that Friedkin had a background in documentary film before helming feature films. "He was approaching it as an agnostic or as an ambivalent [person] — the notion of evil insinuating itself into a situation, and whether that is demonic possession or part of the psychological makeup of the person," Wyatt said. "That's part of what made it wholly terrifying-that it was so plausible." "I believe there is evil in the world and we have certainly seen instances of it historically, and currently," said Geena Davis, who plays Angela Rance in the drama. "I think everyone is capable of an extreme range of behaviors,

depending on what you're exposed to and what your character can resist."

Davis, the founder of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, noted that the producers were well aware of the extensive work she has done to combat sexist Hollywood practices and stereotypes in the media. "When I was first approached, they were very earnest about letting me know" that they wanted her feedback and input, Davis said. Half the show's writers and two of its directors are women, she noted, and she also said that the arcs of the female characters were, in many ways, the dominant parts of the story.

Twists and turns

"I haven't really had to bust anybody on anything," she said. "I think they're going out of their way so that I can be extremely proud of the show." Though it shares many aspects of the original-a family in crisis and priests who attempt to help-this version of "The Exorcist" will layer in the building blocks of a mythology that, in theory, would allow the show to run for some time. "This time around, evil has grander ambitions than targeting an eight-year-old girl in Georgetown," Slater said. Though this bigger story structure will be constructed around the Vances, the family and their relationships will remain the entry points for the audience.

"You need the propulsive twists and turns, and we have plenty of big plot twists, but at the end of the day, it's always going to be about a family in trouble and the priests brought in to help them," Slater said. If audiences didn't become involved in the characters, "we haven't done our jobs." There are scares, Slater said, but it's not a show that will deliver lots of gore every week. "We're learning a lot about what you can and can't accomplish on a TV budget," Slater said. "You have to be very judicious and smart about when you use your scares-you don't want to numb the audience. ... The audience knows the horror is coming, and as long as their patience is rewarded, the pressure is to tell the best story possible, not to tell the most shocking or gratuitous story possible." —Reuters

A Minute With: Robert Redford on magical childhood stories

Hollywood veteran Robert Redford returns to his childhood love of fantasy stories in "Pete's Dragon," a new Disney film about an orphaned boy living in a forest and his friendship with one such creature. The fantasy adventure is a remake of the 1977 movie of the same name and this time movie features a realistic green-furred computer-generated creation of the dragon named Elliott.

Redford, 79, known for films such as "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" and "Out of Africa," plays Meacham, the father of forest ranger Grace (Bryce Dallas Howard) and the only one other than Pete (Oakes Fegley) to encounter the dragon.

Q: You're seen as this champion of independent cinema, so what was it that made you decide to go into this?

A: This was about a chance to return to my own childhood experience and remember times when I was a kid ... I loved stories that had magic in them. Then you grow out of that as you get older and you miss it. So this was a chance to play a role in a film that allowed me to step back into that time.

Q: How did you imagine the dragon? Did anyone give you any cues?

A: No, you really had to imagine the dragon because all you got when you were working was a pole with a tennis ball at the end and that was the dragon ... You had to imagine what the dragon would look like because it hadn't been developed yet.

Q: What do you think this film says about the environment?

A: If we keep cutting down trees, if we keep cutting things away and taking things away, pretty soon there will be nothing left to take away. There will be no planet ... I think the film illustrates the value of something like a forest, the storytelling values something like an animal in the forest that no one believes exists. I think those are very important things in this day and age because we become pretty cynical.

Q: So how much would you say you live the life of someone who keeps their eyes open?

A: My eyes are always open. I'm always looking at what's beyond or behind what I'm looking at and also I love using my imagination. I exercise that because that's what storytelling is about. I love storytelling because I think we're bred on storytelling. — Reuters



Robert Redford

'Game of Thrones' music tour coming to N America

The creators of "Game of Thrones" are turning the blockbuster fantasy epic into a North American concert tour, bringing together both the music and new visuals from the series. The tour next year will focus on the score composed by Ramin Djawadi, who will present the music with a full orchestra and what producers promised to be innovative video technology. "By combining the music with state-of-the-art technology, we are going to bring the astonishing world of Westeros to fans in a live and unique concert experience," the German-

born, half-Iranian composer said in a statement.

Djawadi, who also wrote the score for the Marvel action film "Iron Man," is teaming up on the tour with "Game of Thrones" network HBO and leading concert promoter Live Nation. The tour will open February 15 in Kansas City with a total of 28 dates across the United States and Canada including at New York's Madison Square Garden. Producers said that the tour would include original footage for "Game of Thrones," whose sixth season recently concluded. —AFP

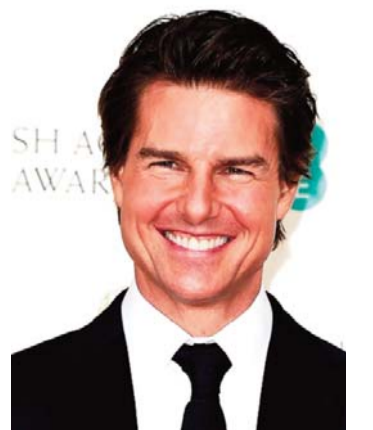


Cruise's 'Mena' pushed back, gets new title

Tom Cruise's cartel film "Mena" is now called "American Made," and is moving from Jan 6, 2017, to Sept 29, 2017, Universal Pictures announced on Monday. "American Made" is the latest collaboration between Cruise and director Doug Liman, who helmed the A-lister in "Edge of Tomorrow." "American Made" is based on the real-life exploits of Barry Seal, a hustler for drug kingpin Pablo Escobar and pilot unexpectedly recruited by the CIA to run one of the biggest covert operations in US history, one that almost brought down the Reagan White House through the Iran Contra scandal. Cruise, himself a trained pilot, plays Seal.

Related Pilot of Fatal Plane Crash Talked About Danger of Shooting Films (VIDEO) Imagine Entertainment's Brian Grazer, Cross Creek Pictures' Brian Oliver and Tyler Thompson, Quadrant Pictures' Doug Davison and Kim Roth are producing. Cross Creek Pictures is financing the film, with Universal handling distribution. The film generated headlines last year, when a plane carrying crew members crashed on the set in

Colombia in September 2015, killing two people and seriously injuring a third person. Local authorities believe that bad weather caused the twin-engine Aerostar to crash. Cruise was in production on the movie at the time of the incident, but was not on the plane. The two people killed were identified as American film pilot Alan David Purwin and Colombian Carlos Berl. — Reuters



Tom Cruise