

“Dumbo”

By Helen Lutz

In 1941 Disney released its hit cartoon “Dumbo” about a baby elephant with extraordinarily large ears. Dumbo, the name derived from his mother’s name Jumbo, was the laughing stock of the circus. Unfortunately, he was clumsy and could do nothing right which required the love and protection of his mother no matter the cost. I have to admit, “Dumbo” was one of my least favorite Disney cartoons growing up; my parents took me to the theater during one of its many re-releases. I found the dancing elephant scene was less than captivating as a child.



Many years later, once my daughters were toddlers, my husband and I saved and saved for a VCR player (mind you, blank tapes cost \$10.00 each and we couldn’t afford many). At the Base Exchange we bought the VHS tape of “Dumbo.” Since we didn’t have many tapes, we watched it over and over again. I can truthfully say that I still disliked the dancing elephants and that it turned out to be one of my daughters’ least favorite Disney stories.

Now Disney and director Tim Burton resurrect the story of “Dumbo” in a live-action movie at theaters everywhere – no talking animals this time. The year is 1919 and the failing Medici Circus, owned by Max Medici (Danny DiVito), is ready to hit the road from its winter home in Florida. Holt Farrier (Collin Farrell), the western trick rider of the circus, returns from his service in WWI; unfortunately, a missing left arm puts a damper on the renewal contract for his act. The circus is the long time Farrier home and Max offers Holt the job of caring for the elephants which includes shoveling huge piles of elephant poop. Holt is less than enthused about the offer, but accepts.

One of the elephants under Holt’s care is the new African elephant, Jumbo. The animal appears to be sick, but as Holt quickly learns Mrs. Jumbo is pregnant and soon provides the circus with a bouncing, baby elephant – it’s sure to be a crowd pleaser and savior for the show. Much to Max’s chagrin, he quickly learns that the baby elephant has enormous, over-sized ears which become the laughing stock of the circus troupe except for the Farrier children Milly (Nico Parker) and Joe (Finley Hobbins). Milly and Joe take a liking to the strange looking newcomer spending time making the little guy comfortable with them.

Imagine the children’s surprise when a feather tickles Dumbo’s nose causing him to sneeze and defy gravity. Yes, the elephant flies – not controlled at all, but definitely flies. Millie and Joe try to convince their father of the baby elephant’s ability, but are met with total skepticism. Continuing to work with Dumbo, the kids learn that the flying depends on the presence of feathers – the magic feather from the original cartoon. Dumbo finally takes off to the amazement of all setting up a fabulous act for Max along with a spectacular offer from the master of amusement V.A. Vandevere (Michael Keaton in the worst toupee ever seen). What could possibly go wrong for the little band of circus entertainers?

Burton and Disney mix together several plot points with the pain of separation between Dumbo and his mother Jumbo; the dreams of Milly to follow a path of science opposed to entertainment (girl power); and the corruption of large corporations as they suck the life out of small, family owned businesses. Burton pokes fun at Disney and the concept of Disneyland/Disney World with references to Tomorrowland in Vandevere’s Dreamland which also offers a scary house of animal horrors called Nightmare Island (I don’t believe that this will ever be an actual Disney attraction). The original “Dumbo” song “Baby Mine” is sung to a ukulele.

The writers create a story that pads the original cartoon length feature with a tale about a family, an extended family and an extraordinary baby with a deformity which turns out to be a blessing. On a scale of one to four Hart Beats I give “Dumbo” ♡♡♡. This one may be a little too sad and spooky in places for the wee ones and lacking in sophistication for the older kids. A plus: Dumbo’s eyes are still an adorable baby blue; a minus: we still have those darn dancing elephants.