Interview: Producer Richard Zanuck of ‘Alice in Wonderland,’ ‘Jaws’

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on June 1, 2010 - 12:03am

CHICAGO – In Hollywood studio royalty, there might be no one as royal as Richard D. Zanuck. Besides being the son of Darryl F. Zanuck, one of the founders of the movie studio system, Richard Zanuck has made his own mark as producer of “Jaws,” “Driving Miss Daisy,” and Tim Burton’s 3-D “Alice in Wonderland.”

Zanuck was born into the movies through his famous father, who founded the 20th Century Fox studio. His first major film job was in 1959, when at the age of 24 he produced “Compulsion,” which starred Orson Welles. He became president of his father’s studio during the transitional times of the 1960s and ’70s, and went on to produce – with David Brown – Steven Spielberg’s first film, “Sugarland Express.”

The legendary Jaws [1975] followed, as well as the Best Picture Oscar for Driving Miss Daisy [1989]. Other notable films include “Cocoon” [1985], “Mulholland Falls” [1996], “Deep Impact” [1998] and “Road to Perdition” [2002]. Lately he has been collaborating with auteur Tim Burton, producing the remake of “Planet of the Apes” [2001], “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory” [2005], “Sweeney Todd” [2007] and the recent “Alice in Wonderland,” releasing on DVD and Blu-Ray Combo Pack on Tuesday, June 1st.

HollywoodChicago got to speak with Richard Zanuck via phone from Hollywood, and he talked about Alice in Wonderland, his early collaboration with Orson Welles and his extraordinary career.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve done a number of films here in Chicago, any specific memories?

Richard Zanuck: I love Chicago, it’s my favorite town. I’ve really got to know it on a couple of films, the last being ‘Road to Perdition,’ which we shot all in the city and surrounding areas. And although I’ve mostly been there in the winter when it was freezing, [laughs] I love the city.

HC: Since you’ve been through a few eras in motion pictures, what do you think of the current 3-D movie craze, as practiced by Alice in Wonderland, as opposed to the first attempt at 3-D in the 1950s?

RZ: They were two different eras entirely. We only saw one 3-D picture when they came out in the 1950s and that really wasn’t that workable and although it became an overnight sensation, it then disappeared very quickly. But the technology of now has drastically and dramatically improved, and so this now what we have with 3-D is much more compatible with the viewer, the glasses are better and the screen technique is better.
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Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)

So is it a fad, now? No. Is it the answer to all of Hollywood’s woes? No. It’s not the answer but it will be around for awhile. I hope and pray that the film community – studios and filmmakers alike – do not abuse it and overuse it, because then it will become like everything else, just ordinary. Right now it’s fresh, and audiences are rushing out to see 3-D. In the case of Alice in Wonderland, most of the theaters around the world were playing it in 2-D. If you have the right story and the right set of circumstances for that story and environment, 3-D enhances all that, but it won’t be the answer to a bad picture.

HC: What did you personally like best about Alice in Wonderland, and what do you think Tim Burton brings to movies that nobody else does?

RZ: What Tim brings is great imagination. In a way, he grounds it in reality, and that’s what probably made this film a success. The whole idea, which was actually the writer Linda Woolverton’s idea, was the key element that attracted Tim and also key to the picture – and that was making Alice an older girl. I think making her older justifies and is the reason or the film’s success.

We’ve just opened in Japan and already we’ve done 100 million dollars in Japan alone. The reason that has happened is because it has become a cultural phenomenon for young teenage girls. They are going back to see it repeatedly, because it gives them a sense of female empowerment, which in that culture they don’t really have. It has become a sensation there, and all around the world.
