

Gorgeous 'Hugo' Plays Like Cinematic Snow Globe

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on November 23, 2011 - 1:58pm

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Martin Scorsese's "Hugo" is a deeply personal piece, a magical tale about imagination and the importance of film preservation presented with some of the most technical expertise in years. It is also a strikingly cold film, an adventure that doesn't contain the whimsy, pace, or charm that it really needed to in order to connect emotionally as well as intellectually. It's a film that's easy to admire with your brain, but hard to love with your heart.

First and foremost, as he often has throughout his career, arguably our best living director has presented a piece that is technically marvelous. This is arguably the most impressive use of 3D to date as it's used not merely as gimmick but to enhance the storytelling and even play with the theme of the piece, as "Hugo," believe it or not, is really a film about the magic of movies. The art direction, cinematography, use of score, etc. – it's all stellar and the film really is worth seeing as a technical exercise.



Hugo

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

However, there's a heart and soul that's missing from this perfectly made machine. In the film, the title character finds a broken-down automaton, a robot that he works to fix with his father. "Hugo" the film is not unlike that automaton – stunningly made but hollow and

expressionless. I was constantly aware of the craft of filmmaking on display without being adequately sucked into the storytelling on an emotional level. With the regularly blowing snow around the Paris setting of the piece, it reminded me of a beautiful, stunning snow globe – amazing to look at but behind glass.

Hugo Cabret (Asa Butterfield) lives behind the clocks at a crowded Parisian train station. He watches the world go by between the four and the five and marvels at the regulars like the librarian (Christopher Lee), florist (Emily Mortimer), guard (Sacha Baron Cohen), and, most of all, the toy shop owner (Ben Kingsley). In the opening scene of the film, the toy maker named Papa George catches Hugo trying to steal from him and confiscates the waif's notebook, only to be struck by a clear personal connection to it. Emotionally shattered, George threatens to burn the notebook, but a child who has been living with him named Isabelle (Chloe Grace Moretz) takes it back for Hugo. How the notebook relates to George's past, the connection between the work that Hugo was doing with his father (played by Jude Law, briefly in flashback) and George, and the very history of filmmaking will play major roles in this sweeping fairy tale.



Hugo

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

The story of “Hugo,” based on the book by Brian Selznick and adapted by John Logan, is so dependent on mystery that it keeps the viewer emotionally disconnected by its very nature. What is the purpose of the automaton that Hugo's father found? What will happen when they find the key to put in it? Why is George so emotionally shaken by Hugo's notebook? Of course, the answers to all of these questions are delicately revealed by Scorsese and Logan with clockwork precision, but the very foundation of the story keeps the viewer asking questions instead of becoming emotionally connected. “Hugo” is a cold, distant film, a piece about the hope that we all have of finding our place and purpose in the world that somehow doesn't register emotionally.

And yet, it's so technically miraculous and thematically important that I'm here to recommend it. 3D has never been this bright, airy, and light on its feet. It's usually a heavy thing that weighs a film down with poor contrast and brightness levels, but it feels organically part of the story here perhaps more than it ever has before. As the clock towers rise in the Parisian sky and the trains barrel through the station, Scorsese proves there is a way to use this technology that doesn't make it feel like a gimmick.



Hugo

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

It should also be noted that, as with most Scorsese films, there's not a false note in the cast. Moretz continues to amaze me and one has to be reminded yet again of a young lady that Scorsese worked with 35 years ago on a little film called "Taxi Driver." Moretz has that Jodie Foster star power. She will be an Oscar winner. Probably multiple times. Butterfield is effective with his bright, urchin-like eyes, but his character gets most lost in the action of the piece. He's such an observer that I wanted more flashbacks to him and his father, more motivation for his quest, more scenes like the one in which he explains how machines never come with unnecessary parts. I wanted to love Hugo, not merely to follow him. The entire supporting cast is effective, especially Kingsley and Cohen, finding the balance of emotion and humor, respectively.

"Hugo" is a hard movie to dislike. It's a piece that's clearly very, very close to the heart of one of the most important filmmakers of all time and it proves yet again that he's willing to take risks and try new forms of storytelling while so many of his peers have settled into the complacent grooves that come with old age. Clearly, I really want to love "Hugo," but I can't quite bring myself to do so. It never hit me below an intellectual level. Now, some might say that a family film that touches the intellect more than pulling at emotional heartstrings is something to value and I see that argument. I just so much wanted "Hugo" to do both.

"Hugo" stars Asa Butterfield, Chloe Grace Moretz, Ben Kingsley, Sacha Baron Cohen, Christopher Lee, Emily Mortimer, Ray Winstone, Helen McCrory, Michael Stuhlbarg, and Jude Law. It was adapted by John Logan and directed by Martin Scorsese. It was released on November 23rd, 2011 and is rated PG.



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