

## Energy of Visual Cinema is the Power of ‘Wonderstruck’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on October 31, 2017 - 11:02am

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – In one of the coolest visual films of the Fall Season thus far, “Wonderstruck” is another winner from director Todd Haynes (“Carol”), who adapts a Young Adult graphic novel by Brian Selznick (who also wrote the screenplay). The wonder of it all, baby.

The film splits between two eras in history, the 1920s and the 1970s, and makes the destination New York City, naturally. The atmosphere in those two decades is the strength of the film, as the black and white 1920s create a dream, and the colorful 1970s have a golden glow of nostalgia. Director Haynes grew up as a teenager in the latter time, and meticulously recreates the grit and glory of pre-Disneyland New York City. The story itself is less impressive, more of a I-figured-it-out fairy tale than a connective warmth. But the heart is in the right place here, and the beauty of the film – especially in the letter perfect re-creation of cinema in the time of silent movies – is all that is necessary to get that old Todd Haynes movie jolt... the characters produce the wonder as they wander.

The film begins in groovy 1978, where a boy named Ben (Oakes Fegley) is pining for his deceased mother (Michelle Williams). He begins to feel her presence, even using a phone in a storm to somehow connect. When a lightning bolt hits the wires, Ben goes deaf, but that doesn’t stop him from escaping to New York City, to find his father, to honor his mother.



Rose (Millicent Simmonds) in 'Wonderstruck'

*Photo credit: Roadside Attractions*

In 1928, a deaf girl named Rose (Millicent Simmonds) is being tortured by her autocratic father (James Urbaniak). She wants to see her mother, silent movie star Lillian Mayhew (Julianne Moore), as she appears in a Broadway play. Rose escapes to New York City, and makes it to the theater, only to find out that her journey might not have been worth it. The two stories, fifty years apart, begin to come together.

The use of silence is the golden key of the film, and there are periods in the film where no dialogue takes place, but it's unnoticeable. Haynes creates a masterful and dreamy 1920s era, and his silent film-within-a-film could be on TCM's "Silent Sunday," and it would seem authentic (Haynes' film is a tribute to Lillian Gish, and her 1928 magnum opus "The Wind"). Julianne Moore – at the peak of her career – portrays both Lillian Mayhew and the older Rose, and creates deep character for both roles.

But the film belongs to the child actors, especially the amazingly camera ready Millicent Simmonds (her debut). Her turn as the 1920s deaf waif, searching for her mother, is exquisite heartache, especially as Haynes puts her perfect-for-the-era face in closeup. Oakes Fegley as 1970s Ben has to explore many varied emotions, and is able to pull them off within his trip. His eventual companion Jamie (Jaden Michael) also is a scene stealer, especially when he teaches Ben rudimentary sign language.



Rose and Ben (Oakes Fegley) Wander in Two Eras for 'Wonderstruck'



Photo credit: Roadside Attractions

This film is an adaptation of a young adult novel, and the screenplay is written by the original author, Brian Selznick. In the declarative structure that most of those novels have, the story doesn’t grab you as much as force your face into it. Will Ben make a discovery in New York City that will solve everything? Haven’t you ever read a young adult novel? Selznick created his universe with graphic illustrations in the book, which may have compensated for the predictable story, as Todd Haynes creates a cinematic atmosphere to do the same.

There is something to having a visual ambience greater than a story, because after all the art of cinema is a picture projected onto a screen. That screen – as an artistic canvas – is utilized to a superior degree by the great Todd Haynes, who as I told him in our interview, is a gift to the creative universe.

**For the HollywoodChicago.com interview of director Todd Haynes of “Wonderstruck,” [click here](#). [20]**

*“Wonderstruck” is currently in nationwide release. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Julianne Moore, Michelle Williams, Millicent Simmonds, Oakes Fegley and Jaden Michael. Screenplay adapted by Brian Selznick, from his novel. Directed by Todd Haynes. Rated “PG”*



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