

## film

## Heads up!

Tim Burton sticks his neck out

**BY ALICIA POTTER** Tim Burton loves an anatomical misfit. Whereas David Lynch stopped championing the malformed after two films, *Eraserhead* and *The Elephant Man*, Burton has populated an

entire body of work with characters who, well, look a little odd. From the utilitarian-fisted manchild of *Edward Scissorhands* and the cross-dressing dreamer of *Ed Wood* to the neoprene-encased hero and grotesque villains of *Batman* and *Batman Returns*, he's a master at divining the fragility, beauty, and dignity in physical difference. And though his latest — a stylistically spellbinding take

★ ★ 1/2  
SLEEPY  
HOLLOW

Directed by Tim Burton.  
Written by Andrew Kevin Walker. With Johnny Depp, Christina Ricci, Miranda Richardson, Michael Gambon, Casper Van Dien, Christopher Walken, and Jeffrey Jones. A Paramount Pictures and Mandalay Pictures release. At the Chen, the Fresh Pond, and the Circle and in the suburbs.

on the Washington Irving chiller about a horseman with no head — isn't exactly a departure, this time, in cutting the scariness with sentimentality and schlock, Burton ends up slitting his own throat.

The first indication that the director has shunned a strict interpretation of the 1819 short story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is this: Ichabod Crane is cute. As played by Burton regular Johnny Depp, our protagonist is no longer the dorky schoolteacher with "hands that dangled a mile out of his sleeves" but a natty New York City constable who, in keeping with Depp's shrewd preference for playing up the sensitivity behind his dark good looks, displays a knack for forensic gadgetry and enough nervous mannerisms to out-flutter Hugh Grant. It's a deviation with great ironic implications: when headless corpses start piling up in the Hudson Valley village of Sleepy Hollow, who better to pit against a neck-whacking madman than a logician who, above all, values the contents of his own head?

Burton's visual gifts and sly sensibility are very much alive among

the stumpy-necked dead of Sleepy Hollow. Indeed, his portentous depiction of the gingerbread-house hamlet is so bleak and fog-swathed, it appears to be filmed in black and white. Likewise, the locals, with their fussy wigs and generous dewlaps, are an appropriately dour bunch who look suspiciously upon Depp's outsider. As for Irving's "Galloping Hessian" (played by Rob Ince and Ray Park, the latter of whom sliced and diced as Darth Maul in *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*), Burton's horseman lives up to his campfire rep: he's a vicious, chop-crazy apparition who, in one of the film's more thrilling sequences, thunders forth from the contorted roots of the Dantesque "Tree of Death" in pursuit of his next throat.

Yet despite the snorting black stallion and the repertoire of ax tricks, the *Blair Witch* twigs have it all over this guy. Once the first of many, many heads roll, the film just isn't frightening. Burton seems more intent on inspiring giggles than goosebumps, as he forces a self-conscious, fantastical homage to the Hammer horror flicks of the



**DON'T LOOK NOW:** Is Christina Ricci afraid to see what Burton's done to Washington Irving?

'50s and '60s. (Christopher Lee, who portrayed Dracula in several of these films, appears in a cameo.) Many of the "scars" buck for tepid laughs: Depp repeatedly gets squirted with blood; someone cries out, "Watch your head!"; faces morph into goofy gobblins; and Christopher Walken, the king of over-the-top kitsch, sports hilarious picket-fence teeth in a flashback of the horseman before he lost his noggin.

The script, by Andrew Kevin Walker of *Seven* and *Fight Club* fame, even excuses the headless one for his murderous ways — it seems that whoever has stolen the horseman's skull from his grave dictates his killings. With that, Burton stokes a subplot around Sleepy Hollow's beady-eyed dignitaries — led by a fine Richard Gambon — as we try to figure out who possesses the purloined pate. It's like a ruse game of Clue: did the reverend do it? the notary? the magistrate? At the same time, Ichabod hits it off with the comely Katrina Van Tassel (Christina

Ricci, wasted here), a flirtation that further muddles the plot with unresolved themes about the co-existence of magic and logic.

The tried-and-true elements of Burton's oeuvre just don't work here. His usually mordant fascination with lost or forgotten children takes a puzzling — and plot-stalling — turn when he saddles the erstwhile Ichabod with an Oedipal complex. Agitated by his run-ins with the horseman, the investigator drifts in and out of a febrile dreamscape in which he revisits some rather intense mother love with bosomy Lisa Marie (Burton's real-life paramour) in the role of Mama Crane.

As if the narrative weren't already fatter than a late-October pumpkin, the director then unleashes a climactic chase scene, some pyrotechnics, and flip toss-away lines worthy of a Schwarzenegger romp. By this point, as Irving's classic fades to little more than a junior-high-English-class memory, it's Burton who's lost his head. ■

## Gender specifics

Hope and Hero make a feminist case

Born in 1942, German filmmaker Werner Herzog has started ruminating in his documentaries on an eventful, precarious life. *My Best Fiend* (1999) chronicles his tumultuous, literally murderous, relationship with

the seemingly psychotic Klaus Kinski, the great star of *Aguirre*, the *Wrath of God* and other Herzog classics. *Wings of Hope* (1999), November 20 through 27 at the Harvard Film Archive, flies back in time to show how frighteningly close Herzog came to not making *Aguirre* or any of his wonderful movies, including this lustrous work.

He was in the Lima airport on Christmas Eve, 1971, trying to get to the *Aguirre* set out in the jungle. A full plane took off without him, and 92 passengers and crew disappeared off the map in a fatal crash. One passenger survived, a 17-year-old German girl named Juliane Koepcke. For *Wings of Hope*, Herzog decided to relive his trauma of that fateful 1971 night by locating Koepcke, having her tell her extraordinary story, and asking her to re-create her trek back to civilization, 28 years after.

Is there enough here for a meaningful movie? Our first sight of Juliane Koepcke is not promising. She's an average-looking woman with glasses and perhaps dyed-blond hair, who shows little anima-



tion when she talks. She might be an optometrist or work, unnoticed, in a drugstore. But are appearances deceiving! By the time *Wings of Hope* has concluded, Koepcke has emerged as a superhero whose survival in the jungle was as shrewd and enterprising, and as courageous, as Robinson Crusoe's.

How did she get to the ground? The first miracle, Koepcke and three seats whirled two miles through the air ("We're not in Kansas anymore!"), and she landed, soundly knocked out, amid soft vegetation. A day later, she awoke with a bad concussion, a frightening gash on her arm. But alive! She wandered away from the crash to try to find help. The cut on her arm filled with maggots, and, against a rain-soaked world of gnawing

bugs, she was wearing only a tattered mini-skirt.

How did she know what to do? The second miracle, Koepcke had been raised by her German émigré parents on an ecological site in the jungle. She had grown up with survival training. (Today, she is a biologist studying rare bat species out in the Peruvian wilds.) Therefore, she realized that she had to locate flowing water and follow it downstream, until the water turned into a navigable river, where natives might find her. And she knew from experience how to traverse jungle water, not caring when crocodiles dove across her path (timid creatures, they were fleeing from a human) but using a walking stick to fend off lethal sting rays.

She drank water, but she was too stunned to eat anything at all. Indomitable, Koepcke stumbled on... for 11 days! Amazing! And to Werner Herzog's credit, *Wings of Hope* is among the rarest of films that's not sexist, or gender-specific, in any way. The final miracle: at no point does Herzog marvel at Koepcke's survival because she is a woman!



**A ROBINSON CRUSOE:** Juliane Koepcke emerges as a survival superhero.

An insider's vantage on *Wings of Hope*? Herb Golder, a BU classics professor, has been collaborating with Herzog in recent years, and he signed aboard for this filmic undertaking as the assistant director. A sublime speaker, Golder will be at Harvard for the November 21 and 22 screenings.

**GENDER IS EVERYTHING,** however, and femaleness the rub, for *A Hero for Daisy*, Mary Mazzi's rousing, inspiring documentary playing November 20 at the Museum of Fine Arts. This film's deserving superhero is Yale crew legend Chris Ernst, a live wire of willfulness, audacity, and non-conformity who in 1976 led a forever-famous protest at her Ivy League school over the lack of locker-room facilities for the women's crew team.

Poor beleaguered Yale, just recently opened up to the softer sex, where George W. Bushmen

got their gentlemanly C's and roamed caveman free! Suddenly there were these humungous women demanding a place to take showers, their way paved by the musclebound, androgynous Ernst. Oh, what they did in the Athletic Office! The whole crew team stripped, exclaiming, "These are the bodies Yale is exploiting." On their bare backs: the phrase "Title IX," reminding Yale of the 1972 congressional legislation mandating gender equality for schools receiving federal aid.

The rest is history: the embarrassed college built a locker room for its female crew. All across America, Title IX began to be enforced, precipitating a wonderful explosion of female athletics. Ernst became a two-time Olympian and today she's a plumber. But she's as colorfully unyielding as ever: she does showers but leaves toilet plungings to her (male?) underlings.

**I'M LEANING MORE AND MORE** toward a gay, *Third Man* reading of *Tight Club*, with the "surprise twist" a smokescreen. Matt Zoller in the *New York Press*: "The Narrator is gay and doesn't know it... fascinated with the male body and images of macho beauty; Tyler is his idealized self-image, a fusion of gay and straight iconography.... The Narrator knows he's supposed to sleep with women, but he finds the act so repellent that he must invent a persona to do the deed on his behalf." ■