

THE CLASSIC

THE TRIPLETS
OF BELLEVILLE

FRANCE, 2003.

Directed by Sylvain Chomet.

(UK title: *Belleville Rendez-Vous*)THE ANIMATION MAKES
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AS DISBELIEF TURNS
TO COMPLICITY IN THE
WHOLE KOOKY FANTASY

BEHOLD AN ARTISTIC EXERCISE in extremes! Just as the animation gains vitality by exaggerating physical dimensions, so every thread of narrative is taken to its absurd limit. *The Triplets of Belleville* is a grotesque assembly of caricature and stereotype, executed in the flowing style so typical of French illustration.

In the beginning it seems as if we have a simple take on a little boy's dream. Exasperated by her orphaned grandson's unenthusiastic torpor, a resourceful old lady tries first a puppy, then a model railway, with little success. But accidentally discovering her grandson's passion for bicycles turns her despair into an unrelenting dedication to his cycling, which is first a boyish passion, then a career obsession.

In a manner characteristic of the film-making throughout, the lighting turns from melancholy blue to bright sun-drenched yellow as the excitement of a first bicycle sets the child's world alight. Really, the grandmother is the star of the show. Her matter-of-fact approach injects comedy into a quite peculiar offering, and her cunning in the face of constant adversity provides the story with much of its narrative drive.

At a glance, this may be a lighthearted and charmingly silly film, but there is also a darkness to it. The son grows up to be a cycling champion in his native France—a country that takes its cycling very seriously. The hardship of his rigorous preparation is treated with humor, even as his team's fortunes take a turn for the worse in the second half of the film. Foul play during a long and grueling Tour de France turns to kidnap and ends in a thoroughly murky way, with a final rescue and escape sequence as dramatic as in any action movie.

As with much of the best animation, the story is carried by the idiosyncratic illustration. The animators, under writer/director Sylvain Chomet, found inspiration in reducing the landscape and characters to extremes. Take the absurdly steep hills, brilliantly depicted with some exhausted cyclist slogging his way up, or a car struggling and—thumbing its nose at physics—cartwheeling backwards to its demise. Or the comically drafted mafia heavies, great black blocks of menace, their square forms swallowing up their heads entirely. This is animation that can make you laugh out loud as disbelief turns to complicity in the whole kooky fantasy.

Dimensions are bizarrely distended, nowhere better than the ocean-going liner that stands taller than any building, its slender, towering form evocative of a golden era. At times the film seems like an extended piece of artwork, and as the ship weathers a storm at sea we are taken to another world entirely.

Very few words are uttered in this 80-minute wonder, but there is plenty of music and singing—upbeat pre-war dance hall style, with a distinctly French flavor (think accordions). The films open with three Vaudeville singers, all furs and feathered hats, introducing the catchy Belleville theme tune. In true cine-adventure style, they crop up later as minxish old ladies, down-and-out accomplices in a daring rescue sequence. The music is infectious, as is the love that links all the characters (excepting an extensive cast of appalling crooks).

If some of the scenes seem rather whimsical or even irrelevant, they are all pieces of a charming jigsaw. The makers of this animation swing from childish delight in the exaggeration of everyday life, to brooding depictions of seedy dives populated by gun-toting hoodlums.

In this film we have cycling, trains passing with relentless frequency, gangsters, destitution, homelessness, abduction, gambling and an overweight dog. Drama, in other words, as much as in any epic adventure. Don't expect to find anything else like this on the shelves of your local video stores—it's a one-off stroke of genius. Fuel for a good night, this one, which comes with a guarantee to lift the spirits.