

MOVIE REVIEW

The Whole Wide World

Peek Inside Strange 'Whole Wide World'

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What do you know about Robert E. Howard? When Arnold Schwarzenegger was becoming a movie star in the "Conan the Barbarian" movies in the early '80s, there was a resurgence of interest in the original creator of the pulp fiction hero. But for those of us merely passing by the phenomenon, the only thing that seemed to stick in our minds was that Howard was the guy who killed himself when his mother died. That's not exactly what happened.

But Howard definitely had an unusual attachment to his ailing mom, and, if Dan Ireland's "The Whole Wide World" has the story right, it was a relationship that destroyed any chance of his having a normal life.

"The Whole Wide World" is actually the story of Robert E. Howard (Vincent D'Onofrio), as told by Novalyne Price (Renee Zellweger), a young schoolteacher who befriended and fell in love with Howard in the mid-'30s and, half a century later, wrote about it in a memoir, "One Who Walked Alone." It's a story purposely written to debunk the myth of Howard as a mad genius, but in fact, one that perpetuates it. That's not necessarily bad.

If the story, adapted by first-time screenwriter Michael Scott Myers, has been gilded by the years, it at least aims for another side of the truth. D'Onofrio plays Howard as a loud, boastful, insecure, socially awkward mama's boy who, in the presence of someone who doted on his talent and his imagination, became a bashful adolescent. If that's Price's rebuttal to all those attacks on his character, we may safely split the difference.

In any event, "The Whole Wide World" is a fascinating account of those years in rural Cross Plains, Texas, where the reclusive writer hammered out scores of the kind of action-adventure tales that reportedly made him the most popular American fiction writer of the late '20s and early '30s.

Price's relationship with Howard begins in 1933, when they're introduced by her former boyfriend. To everyone else, Howard is the town weirdo, but Price is an aspiring writer herself, with rejection letters to prove it, and she can't resist the opportunity to quiz a pro. Howard, in turn, can't believe his luck in having a pretty and intelligent woman interested in him.

What follows is a strange and strangely moving love story. It's not exactly unrequited--they show physical affection, eventually, if just a kiss--but Howard is too emotionally constricted, too bound to his domineering mother (a wonderful Ann Wedgeworth), to allow it to evolve naturally.

When Novalyne impetuously kisses him, after a year or so of quasi-dating, he collects himself, and gives her a speech, right out of the mouth of one of his macho characters, about being too footloose to take a wife.

Ireland, a producer making his directing debut, has taken on a tough assignment, with a love story that builds tension without providing a moment of release or a sliver of optimism.

What he has is two terrific actors and the faith that they can make the journey worthwhile. Zellweger, who has audiences eating out of her hands as Tom Cruise's co-star in "Jerry Maguire," is a dream here, as well.

There's a depth of honesty and intelligence in Zellweger's faintly Asian eyes that attracts and holds our attention like few actors can. She more than holds her own with Cruise, and here, she seems to rein in D'Onofrio every time he threatens to fly off the screen.

It's still a wildly eccentric performance that D'Onofrio gives; Howard is so loud at times, you'll be wishing you could get your hands on his volume control. But at other times, when Howard's desperation for Novalyne leaves him literally tongue-tied, D'Onofrio's expression melts your heart.

In the end, "The Whole Wide World" probably doesn't provide any real insights into Howard's personality. Mad genius may be as close as anybody's going to get to an explanation for a man whose facile prose dazzled H.P. Lovecraft himself, and who did, in fact, kill himself when a doctor told him his mother's condition was hopeless.

But if Novalyne Price, now 88 and living in Louisiana, got something off her chest, it's our pleasure.

The Whole Wide World, 1996. PG, for a substantial amount of mild language and mature thematic elements. A Kushner-Locke production, released by Sony Pictures Classics. Director Dan Ireland. Producers Ireland, Carl-Jan Colpaert, Vincent D'Onofrio, Kevin Reidy. Script Michael Scott Myers, based on the memoir "One Who Walked Alone," by Novalyne Price. Photography Claudio Rocha. Editor Luis Colina. Music Harry Gregson-Williams. Production design John Frick. Set decoration Terri L. Wright. Costumes Gail McMullen. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Renee Zellweger as Novalyne Price. Vincent D'Onofrio as Robert E. Howard. Ann Wedgeworth as Mrs. Howard. Harve Presnell as Dr. Howard.
