

Maleficent (2014)

A morally twisted and misandrist tale starring Angelina Jolie



The *Sleeping Beauty* riff *Maleficent* is another overproduced summer spectacular, released into a world that has unfortunately more than one wasted opportunity to make an excellent fantasy film for amateurs of the genre. After the release of adaptations of classics like *Snow White* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*, both of which were highly entertaining and simply amazing, this movie was a rich yet somehow disappointing mix of the good and the pretty bad. The film's story is an example of what *The Guardian's* film critic Peter Bradshaw calls the “post-*Wicked* genre”, some kind of revisionist slash backstory fairytale genre which gets quite affecting at times. There are moments in *Maleficent* that are profoundly disturbing, in the way that ancient myths and Grimm fairytales are disturbing. They strike to the heart of human experience and create the kinds of memories that young children — young girls particularly — will obsess over, because on some level they'll know, even without the benefit of adult experience, that the film is telling them a horrible sort of truth...

*** Keep your kids from seeing this movie unless you want them to be disappointed and very confuse ! ***

SYNOPSIS

The tale begins with a flashback to Maleficent (**Angelina Jolie**) as a young fairy, befriending a farm boy who's snuck into her forest on a mission of thievery. They grow close and continue to see each other, even after the king of a human stronghold on the outskirts of the forest tries to invade Maleficent's domain. As teenagers, the fairy and the human share a silhouetted lip lock on a hilltop — *true love's first kiss* in the Disney parlance. Yet he stops coming around, breaking the girl's heart. Years later, the now adult Stefan (**Sharlto Copley**) overhears the now dying king promising his realm to anyone who can kill Maleficent. And it's here that we head into the first of the film's awfully disturbing sequences. After snuggling with Maleficent on a hilltop, Stefan gives her a drink laced with a sleeping potion, prepares to murder her after she's passed out, then has a failure of nerve. He slices off her wings instead, and brings them to the king as proof that he did as promised. This symbolic assault has sexual overtones of course : Maleficent doesn't just lose her wings ; they're stripped from her against her will. The attack is also a maiming or disfigurement that, in this context, feels like a gender specific physical message, drawn from a continuum that includes everything from the hacking off of a woman's long hair to heavier mutilations into which details I will not enter...

The scene of Maleficent waking up on a hilltop with huge scars in her back, then weeping with rage, is the most traumatizing image I've ever seen in a supposedly children-targeted Disney fairytale ! Anyway, this assault transforms Maleficent from an unabashed heroine into an anti-heroine, warping Disney's 1959 vanilla film into a conflicted *revenge story* with an unmistakable *feminist undertone*. It's the deepest betrayal imaginable. Every subsequent action Maleficent takes — including casting a spell on Stefan's daughter Aurora (**Elle Fanning**) that will send her into a coma at age 16 after a finger prick by a spinning wheel needle — is driven by the trauma of that betrayal. In a few words, this is a film about a girl named Maleficent who starts out good, turns bad for good reasons, and then tries to right the wrongs she committed to prove how good she is ! But it's also a film of resonant gestures and logic, in which ancient and contemporary predicaments jostle against each other : romantic betrayal or sexual assault and their psychological aftermath ; the fundamental differences between male and female minds and genders ; the way that patriarchal culture fuses women's sense of self-worth to their bodies ; even the tangled maternal impulses that independent single women who never wanted kids might experience when they have to care for a child. The movie is a mess, but it's a rich mess...

THE GOOD

- **Excellent acting by Angelina Jolie.** Despite winning a slew of deserved awards for early performances, Jolie has never gotten the credit she deserves both as an old-fashioned glamorous movie star and as a fairly skilled and thoughtful actress : this part fuses both sides of her talent. Her mesmerizing stillness makes us pay closer attention to Maleficent's every word and gesture than the film's screenplay deserves. Even when she's doing the *ice mask of death* expression showcased in the trailer, we can feel her conflicted feelings as she pretends to be young Aurora's benevolent godmother, playing a role and then slowly becoming that role, just as we felt her rage at being violated and mutilated.
- **Elle Fanning as her refreshing counterpart Aurora.** Elle Fanning is quite convincing as the *only* good and innocent person in the movie, even if the doe-eyed giggling Goldie Locks characterization may seem somewhat childish at first. Her natural acting and innocence are refreshing, and she somehow stole the film in every scene she was in. Unfortunately, that wasn't enough to save the movie. Nor were Maleficent's interactions with Diaval, as enjoyable as they were...
- **A nice maternal relationship between Aurora and her Godmother.** However, showing this relationship in opposition to — not one, but two examples of disastrous or unexciting male-female relationships was an awful way to do. It looked like the producers wanted to say : “Love between a man and a woman is obsolete. Only women can feel true love. Only their love is the strongest of all the loves in this world.” This new solution — Maleficent's kiss is the one to save Aurora in the end, not the Prince's —, which replaces the age old solution of a man being the one delivering the kiss of true love, wasn't a bad idea in itself, but when it just came, it felt somewhat ineffective and out of place.

THE BAD

- **Contradictory storyline logic.** The problematic and partly unexplained backstory of how Maleficent became evil and vengeful before Aurora's coronation misleads the audience into thinking that the Aurora part of the story will have some kind of connected flow to the original. It clearly doesn't. Here are some other disappointing changes and choices I spotted in the new storyline :

- In the original storyline, a major conflict is **Maleficent's inability to locate Aurora's sanctuary** in the forest. In this movie, she finds her right away. So much for suspense !
- The **forest meeting between Prince Phillip and Aurora** makes much more sense in the original. He was at her coronation and knew “once upon a dream” that they would be together in the end. In this newer adaption, he just finds her by “getting lost” in the forest. How can he do that when Maleficent has placed an impenetrable thornbush wall around the Moors which even the king's best guards can't enter ?
- **Maleficent's magic** can put anyone to sleep on a moment's notice. Why, then, when she is freed from the iron net in the last battle, does she not place a quick spell upon the king and guards once she arises to escape them more easily ? Her powers were **clearly left undefined**. Besides the fact that she is presented as “not evil” in this film, she is also very wimpy and pathetic. What, she can't do anything ! When we see her fight an army at the beginning, all she does is fly around and slap a few soldiers with her wings. In *Sleeping Beauty*, she could transport herself to another place in a matter of seconds, shoot lightning from her staff, and transform into another form other than her own, a dragon for instance. But she didn't do any of that in this movie. Or was it only to show how good and nice she “actually” was ?
- **Ostentatious but not always effective visual effects.** This unconnected and contradictory storyline is wrapped up in a visual cacophony of beautiful Preraphaelite-inspired meadows and silly sparkling creatures that look like they've been ripped from *The Phantom Menace*, a bombastic and unmemorable score by the plagiaristic James Newton Howard, chaotic images alternating wide-angles and close-ups patched up together with fast cutting that only signify a lack of true filmmaking imagination.
- **Murky CGI soup.** Part from the clever morphing sequence where Diaval turns from crow to man, action sequences are pretty unconvincing here. I got quite fed up with those dopey tree warriors after a few minutes — anyway, all fightings were done in a few minutes. So much for an action movie ! Once again, just as they did with *Alice*, Disney wasted a perfectly fair opportunity to adapt *effectively* their animated work to the live action screen.

THE VERY BAD

- **Awful male characters** such as :
 - **The Old King** : A greedy old geezer who has nothing better to do than invade muddy magical forests filled with trolls and rabbits to fill his leisure time.



- **Mad King Stefan** : An irresponsible father, unloving husband and self-pitying prince driven insane by power hunger. Yes, this is unfortunately what male viewers can relate to in this movie : a peasant turned king who quickly but very inexplicably devolves from a lover to a tyrant turned mad by his apparently obsessive and overwhelming urge to kill his old love !? And if you wondered, his reasons are beyond anyone's understanding. And when he dies, suddenly there is peace between his gloomy kingdom and Maleficent's fluffy bunny land ? Everyone is happy, even Aurora, whose dad was killed just a few minutes ago ! Why, tell me, why on earth did King Stefan have to be the villain, to marry his Queen only to take over the kingdom, and to pursue his old love with inexplicable fires of hatred ? *What has Disney come to ?*

Last but not least, the third glorious representative of the male gender in this film :

- **Baby-faced Prince Philip** : A debilitating adolescent who just doesn't know how to kiss a girl. I mean, he is a lovely lad, but nothing more than a pretty face in this story.



Which leads us to darker considerations about **switching genders** and **twisting morals** :

- **Bashing Feminism.** The first thing you notice in most films nowadays is that females are universally portrayed as the source of good, happy and light, and the more effeminate the character the better. Masculine qualities are invariably associated with greed, anger, pettiness and violence, and the more masculine the character the more corrupt. There is a tendency in modern entertainment, such as Broadway's definitely wicked *Wicked*, to portray evil by predatory men as **internally motivated**, and evil by women as **externally provoked**. It's not *her* fault she did this or that, it was the only option available to her because of what *he* did. She's just *misunderstood*, and once we embrace the feminine superiority the world will be a better place. This is just another feminist fantasy in which girls are smarter and stronger than boys, the feminine is divine and the masculine must be destroyed. I mean, I'm a woman, but this is an offense against all male viewers ! Not a single time had I the feeling of seeing a positive male character, not even the young Prince, who was more like a puppet for the will of Maleficent. In this world, men are

either aggressive or caring only for themselves, but do not poses any kind of positive characteristics for which we could support them. In such world males are only there to fulfil their task of fertilizing, otherwise they have no earthly use. Females can live happily without males, who can only bestow them with sadness and regret. I guess this is the kind of attitude which turned this world into a hostile and selfish hell, not even Orwell imagined in his wildest dreams...

- **Subverting monarchy.** There are hints of an anarchist slant running through *Maleficent* — from an opening narration that contrasts the monarchy of the humans with the freedom and self-governance of the fairies, to the riot shields carried by King Stefan’s guards in their final showdown with Maleficent.



- **A disappointing Disney Villain.** Alas, the most evil Disney villain for over 50 years was reduced to nothing more than a scorned woman out to seek revenge for the betrayal of her beloved. I love the background exploring genre, except when it tries to excuse the bad guys. *Understanding* the bad guy does *not excuse* what they have done. It should only *show* where all this evil comes from. But nah, here we just have a victim of circumstances who never becomes evil at all ! If you're going to show us the “origins” of a famous villain, it's okay to give them supplementary layers in order to make them more interesting and multi-dimensional, but *not* to say they were never evil at all in the first place ! And so they needed another villain : Stefan. In this movie, the king has suddenly been reduced to

a debilitating one-dimensional villain that could almost make us regret we came in theaters in the first place ! Or did the scriptwriters just take King Stefan completely out of character in order to make Maleficent look good ?

- **A new Driving Force behind the story.** “Hell hath no fury than a woman scorned” : this is the new driving force behind *Sleeping Beauty*. Except the beginning scenes of a youthful Maleficent falling in love are not even remotely believable. To fall from grace to betrayal has to be tangible and dripping with poison. It must be something more than just a monologue infatuation and stolen wings.
- **Twisted morals.** What's up with trying to blur the line between good and evil in Disney movies these days ? *Frozen*, for instance. Walt Disney is definitely rolling in his grave...

“Of all the stirring legends of the triumph of good over evil, none has ever been so inspirational to me as *Sleeping Beauty*,” said **Walt Disney**.

I hate to say it, but Disney is dead. Parents, don't let your kids see this movie. It is a brainwash action to show evil is good and men are bad. Maleficent, it says, is a good fairy but she is looking nothing like one : what, are you kidding me ? She is clearly projected to be a demon with her black wings, snake skin, huge horns and staff. The movie should be PG-13 at least !

Unfortunately, this isn't the first film lately to try and twist morals, change the perspective of kids and kill their innocence. Don't be fooled by the special effects, it's a travesty. If you love the traditional iconic role of Maleficent remaining in darkness, then forget the lies the trailer told you, for the glorious black dragon is covered in daffodils and pink tutus in this film !

CONCLUSION

This film is a dark and raw story written from the dark and raw experience of today women who decided to portray their own unfiltered subjective emotional landscape on film instead of adapting a fairytale that is, in their mind, outdated and escapist. It is the personal, inner journey of a girl whose Prince turned into a Frog. It talks about trying to recover from a physical trauma and emotional betrayal by those who are closest to us and who we trust the most. That's what makes it so viscerally and emotionally cathartic, so powerful and so surprisingly adult. But that's not what we came to watch, or is it ?