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MONDAY, JANUARY 08, 2007

My #1 choice for 2006: IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THADDEUS THACKERAY by Adam McDaniel

I'm embarrassed to say that I had, at first, absolutely *zero* interest in reading what would turn out to be my favorite script of 2006.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THADDEUS THACKERAY by Adam McDaniel

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This is an animated adventure film, and judging from the emailed query the basic premise was something I figured I'd seen a few times before...a sort of LAST ACTION HERO meets FREAKY FRIDAY meets INDIANA JONES spoof. The opening sequence is itself a comic take completely ripped from the beginning of RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK, and I probably would've dismissed the whole thing altogether if I hadn't laughed at it so much. It's pretty damn funny, it's very, very cute, and it's extremely well written.

By page twelve, though, I realized that this was going to be a *much* different movie from the one I had mistaken it for. By the last page, not only had I laughed and laughed hard, but I even choked up once or twice. (The Unsung Critic ain't no wimp, either.)

It's rare when a spec script gains momentum in Hollywood, yet it's damn near unheard of, if not impossible, for an animated spec script. Animated movies are extremely costly nowadays, and without the backing of a major studio like Disney or DreamWorks behind them, writers of such projects don't stand a chance.

That's a hell of a shame, because IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THADDEUS THACKERAY would make one hell of a movie.

It's set in 1943, and follows a 14-year-old boy named Judson who, with his friend Kenny, sneak into a local movie theater to catch an animated adventure serial. The movie opens with one of the serials—"episode nine"—where we are introduced to our hero, Dublin McGinn, and his trusty teenage sidekick, Thaddeus Thackeray.

Dublin's a clownish version of Indiana Jones—no less rugged or heroic, but loveably goofy and obviously lacking in the brains department. And like the

great movie, but Hollywood producers and agents just don't give a damn?

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BE HONEST: WAS THE STRIKE WORTH IT?

famous Dr. Jones before him, Dublin has a little creature phobia that makes him go bonkers.



But the central character in all this is Thaddeus Thackeray, a pint-sized, nerdish bookworm from England with a genius IQ and a somewhat bratty attitude. On the surface, he's the brains to Dublin's brawn... but let's just say that looks are deceiving, for Thaddeus has a few surprises up his oversized sleeves.

The adventure begins when, for whatever reason, Judson and Thaddeus switch bodies. Judson is now trapped as the comic sidekick in Dublin's movie world, while Thaddeus is thrown into the real world of Judson's Pennsylvania hometown...and because they still appear to be who they once were (Judson looks like Thaddeus/Thaddeus looks like Judson), everyone around them suspects that the boys are either completely

joking or going insane.

For Judson this becomes a literal fight for survival, as facing episode after episode of outrageous animated dangers is a lot harder than it looks without Thaddeus' expertise. For Thaddeus, it's a somber wake-up call to an all-too-real world--a world at war, where heroes, as well as dreams, can actually die.

I know what you're thinking...that this all seems just a little too familiar, with whiffs of LAST ACTION HERO, FREAKY FRIDAY, and THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO all thrown in. McDaniel even admits this in his query, but his script manages to have a life and a spirit that is completely, wholeheartedly its own.

Once Judson manages to convince Dublin of the "body swap"—with Dublin's lack of intelligence, it's both hard for him to understand yet easy for him to accept—they team up to complete Thaddeus' mission of finding the mystical crown of Therajian before the nefarious Henri Debaucherie (what a name!) can claim it for his own evil use. Meanwhile, Thaddeus finds himself like a fish out of water in Judson's neighborhood, having to brave the hell known as high school, face the local bully, and convince a team of scientists at Princeton that he's uncovered the secret of fusion power in exchange for the opportunity to get back home. And the only one who can possibly help Thaddeus is Judson's best friend, Kenny...who isn't quick to believe Thaddeus' rather fantastic story. (The scene where Kenny is finally convinced holds one of the script's biggest laughs.)

The script splits Judson's and Thaddeus' stories roughly in half, jumping back and forth from one world to the other. The timing, structure, and layout of all this is done with a great deal of panache and style. While the Judson/Dublin story is easily the more exciting of the two, with plot points liberally borrowed from—and greatly spoofing—the Indiana Jones series, it's

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the more original Judson/Kenny storyline that gives the film its heart.

So...what's makes this script so special?

It's funny, yes.

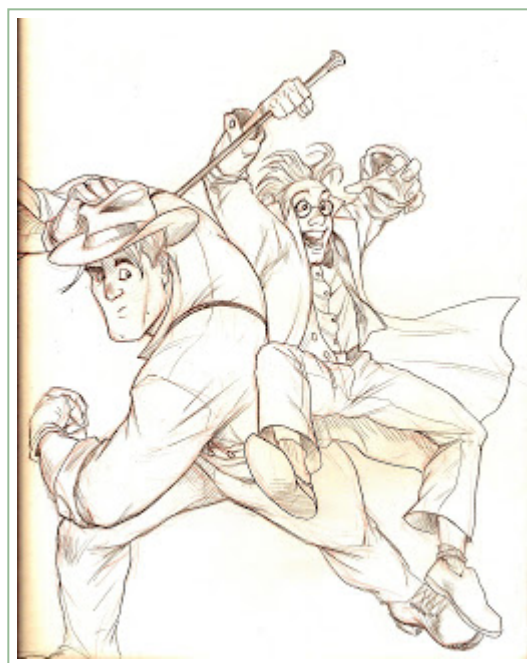
It's well written and well structured, yes.

It has a likeable story and characters, yes yes yes.

Sometimes you read something that just has a kind of indescribable thing to it—an energy, a spirit, that you can't really put your finger on. For lack of a better word, I'll call it...*magic*. And IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THADDEUS THACKERAY has magic to spare.

The friendships and camaraderie are everything here, and if the Indiana Jones inspired adventure storyline seems rushed, tacked on, even irrelevant, the charm and wit of the characters more than make up for it.

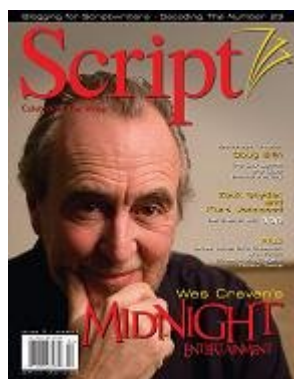
Dublin is the movie's scene-stealer, and one of the best things about the script is how different his chemistry is with each of the boys. Thaddeus taunts and belittles Dublin so much that when Judson appears, he's completely shocked to be on the receiving end of a child's hero worship. He tries his best to live up to Judson's high expectations, and actually becomes the hero he always wanted to be. Dublin may not have brains, but the big guy sure has heart. Thaddeus, too, goes through a significant change: finding himself in the real world, vulnerable for the first time, he realizes just how valuable Dublin's friendship was.



What surprised me most about IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THADDEUS THACKERAY was how much it touched me. Beneath all the action and humor lies a bittersweet, even mournful nostalgia that's virtually unheard of in today's animated fare. These may be simple cartoon characters, but they're all so wonderful, so rounded and charming, I somehow wish they actually existed.

That's saying something.

At 115 pages, the script is quite long for an animated film, but that's not to say it's overlong. Scenes move fast, and I can imagine a lot of the dialog being done rapid-fire, though there are some moments where it needs to be trimmed down in order for scenes to really flow naturally.

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The script's epilogue, which jumps ten years into the future, is OK and doesn't feel tacked on, but it also seems a bit...strange. I guess it depends on your taste. Like the climax of PETER PAN, McDaniel shows some of his former child characters now all grown up, and the result might seem a bit more melancholy than the crowd pleasing, rousing effect McDaniel obviously was going for.

But this is all just twaddle. IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THADDEUS THACKERAY is not only a script that I loved reading, but a movie I'd love to see. And see more than once.

I'm even hoping for a sequel.

Posted by [THE UNSUNG CRITIC](#) at [12:55 PM](#)



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