

Movie Magic

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

Directed by Alfonso Cuarón

Written by Steve Kloves, J. K. Rowling (novel)

Starring Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson, Rupert Grint, David Thewlis, Gary Oldman, Michael Gambon, Alan Rickman, Maggie Smith, Robbie Coltrane, Emma Thompson

Four Stars

Running Time: 136 minutes

Reviewed by David Lavery

Early in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, young wizard Harry, a teen-runaway from Privet Lane and the insufferable Dursleys (in anger he had caused Aunt Petunia to swell like a balloon and float away in a Willy Wonkaish moment), is transported by the mysterious, multi-storied, Knight Bus to The Leaky Cauldron, in the lobby of which we note a man reading Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. Only a couple of seconds in duration, the moment is nevertheless significant, not only because *Prisoner* is a story that by its end will make intriguing use of time travel but as a signal to its audience that the cinematic Potterverse is under new management.

The news over a year ago that Mexican filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón (*Y Tu Mamá También*, *The Little Princess*) would direct the third film in the Potter franchise stimulated a mixture of surprise and excitement. Word that David Thewlis and Gary Oldman, British actors better known for playing psychopaths and villains, had been cast as Professor Lupin and Sirius Black (the prisoner of the title), likewise perplexed, and in another major change, Michael Gambon, we knew, would replace the late Richard Harris as Albus Dumbledore. The first two Potters, directed by Chris Columbus, had been competent but uninspired adaptations, faithful in their way, and definitely Columbus' best work, but literal, nearly devoid of true magic—movies about wizards made by a muggle. With Cuarón at the helm, fans of the phenomenally popular books of J. K. Rowling were filled with new hope, now proven justified

Reportedly a complete newcomer to the Potterverse when he took on the assignment, Cuarón must have taken the crash course at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for he gets so many things right. *Prisoner* is more frightening than its predecessors (his Dementors, especially in their first appearance on The Hogwarts Express, are at least as scary as *Lord of the Rings*' Ring Wraiths), more atmospheric (I especially liked the way flowers turned to ash in the presence of the Dementors), more darkly humorous, more faithful to Rowling's Roald Dahl-ish sense of humor (would Columbus have had the Whomping Willow periodically snatching tweeting birds out of the air?), with better special effects (including a

Hagrid who finally looks like a giant, an astonishing werewolf, and an amazingly realized Hippogriff).

Cuarón's actors perform superbly as well. The Potter films (*Prisoner* is the third of a planned seven) are being produced at a breakneck pace, racing against the far too rapid maturing of Radcliffe, Watson, and Grint, all of whom appear considerably older than in *Chamber of Secrets*, but they have grown in acting ability as well as size. For the first time in his career, Thewlis is endearing and heroic; Oldman does a good job of capturing the seemingly dangerous Sirius; and Gambon makes a perfectly fine Dumbledore, though less kindly and endearing than the Harris version. In a small role as Professor Trelawney Emma Thompson is myopically hilarious.

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban is wonderful—a movie about wizards made by a wizard.