

Rango: Fear and dehydration in Las Vegas

“Rango,” the new Gore Verbinski film is Roman Polanski’s “Chinatown” combined with Sergio Leone’s ‘Man without a Name’ series seen through the eyes of a computer animated lizard. That is not an insult in any way, for Rango’s script attempted a complexity not often seen in animated film and pays superb tribute to some of the finest films ever made. Rango contains elements that would be thought of as contrived if it were a live action film, but here they work beautifully, not leaving out one staple of the western genre; the showdown at high noon, the mysterious hero, the gun-slinging, even the classic shot of the villain through the hero’s arched legs. It’s all there, however there are frequent sparks of originality along with a few unexpected references, such as a cameo from Hunter S. Thompson and Dr. Gonzo of “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.” If this cameo seems out of place, just wait.

The story centers around an awkward lizard unsure of his place in the world. At first he seems content role-playing with inanimate objects in his glass box where his unseen human owners keep him, but because of a freak accident, or perhaps fate, his glass box falls from the opened back window of their car in one of the most spectacular sequences of the film. Finding himself alone on an abnormally busy desert highway, the legend of Rango begins. He encounters a wise and cryptic armadillo who speaks of the “Spirit of the West,” eventually convincing Rango to venture off into the desert claiming there is a town somewhere within the dry and desolate wasteland. There sure enough is: the town of Dirt. Once Rango arrives in Dirt the usual plot devices occur: he is first thought of as a strange newcomer and rejected, he then proves himself purely by luck and is adopted as the town’s leader. This part of the story is just filler; it must happen so the rest of the movie can happen. Well, once Rango is Sheriff the true story takes form. The town is running out of water and foul play is suspected. There is an ominous turtle as the town’s mayor, almost identical to the John Huston character from Chinatown. For any film lover, Rango is a smorgasbord of references, which again never fail to surprise you with their sophistication.

The visuals and the voice work by Johnny Depp are what really elevate the film, for the beginning is slow and awkward. The film really doesn’t become engaging until the second act and the absence of character background in the attempt to fulfill the mysterious legend created by Clint Eastwood, leaves it feeling a bit shallow. There are a group of Spanish owls who narrate the film, in what feels like an attempt to pander to the children of the audience, but they fall flat, not really adding anything to the experience and at times even taking away from the film. The animation is the best yet, making the viewer think they are looking at real creatures, before realizing that’s impossible. There are moments in the film that are truly beautiful and they remind you how much of an art animation can be. But in the end, Rango has its success and its failures, only missing an incestuous subplot featuring Faye Dunaway and leaving you wondering if the entire story was just something Hunter S. Thompson dreamt up during an acid flashback.