

If Nick Park and co. at Aardman gradually established themselves as a sort of millennial plasticine Ealing, then surely 'Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit' is their diversion into Hammer horror territory. Aardman's plunge into the daunting world of feature-length production had begun with 'Chicken Run' (2000), which set something of a precedent with its own co-opting of a broad, recognisable genre, on this occasion the wartime prison break drama, and the much-loved Wallace & Gromit followed suit with a good old-fashioned monster spooker. Ok, it tones down its terrors in favour of good old English standbys like garden fêtes, marrow-growing contests, and aerial dogfights, yet this in itself all shows a keen awareness of the frequently clichéd vision of Britain depicted in our genre fare, with emphasis often placed on class-system clashes (compare the respective foxhunter sequences in 'The Hound of the Baskervilles', 'The Tomb of Ligeia', 'The Plague of the Zombies' and 'The Final Conflict', for example – our 'proper' horror films straying every bit as far from their fear focus and using traditional imagery to offer comment on wider issues).

We probably have as many fictional 'national treasures' as we do real ones – for every Florence Nightingale or Mo Farah, say, there's a 'James Bond' or 'Sherlock Holmes'. An instant hit as soon as 'A Grand Day Out' took to the screens in 1989, both Wallace and Gromit leapt on to everyone's list of praiseworthy favourites, consolidating their success with 'The Wrong Trousers' (1993), perhaps their defining half-hour, and 'A Close Shave' (1995). And if Wallace is a national treasure, then surely so too is his 'voice', Peter Sallis, the veteran tv and film performer who proved the perfect match for the character's foibles and eccentricities. The stoic and silent Gromit is a classic foil, at face value a faithful companion, though his lack of speech allows for a variety of arch sideways glances, eye-rolls, and other comic reactions; Gromit also often appears to be the true brains of the outfit, and frequently saves the day, happy to do so without proportionate praise or reward. Their immediate reception by the public brought a whole new positive spin on the phrase 'heroes with feet of clay'!

Although Aardman Animations had crafted music videos (most famously Peter Gabriel's 'Sledgehammer') and contributed sequences to popular television shows, displaying a range of styles and talents, they have over time developed a certain house 'look' for their major characters - the expressive ping-pong-ball eyes, handle-like ears positioned at 90 degrees, and particularly the wide rectangular mouths and prominent gnashers. This establishes a visual brand that marks their productions and renders them instantly identifiable, even to the youngest audiences. Those teeth! Somehow they capture and contain the personality, the very essence, of the individual character concerned, and can convey every emotion from humour through anguish and surprise and back around to positivity. Despite often possessing a near-identical dental arrangement, the villains of the piece will exhibit a sly, thin-lipped (or beaked!) grin or grimace that picks them out as "wrong 'uns" (as Wallace might have it). It's a remarkable shorthand method and a global trademark.

'Curse of the Were-Rabbit' came with its share of problems and doubts - Wallace & Gromit were established as masters of the short-form, 25/30-minute mini-masterpiece, but could their carefully constructed universe carry a longer feature? If the settings had to be expanded, or an excess number of new participants added, might this destroy the magic? Plus, given the family appeal of the duo and the entire Aardman operation by this point, were Park, co-director Steve Box, and studio producers Peter Lord and David Sproton about to kill the goose that laid the golden egg? Would a longer-form item see audiences filled with restless and bored children, and frustrated mums and dads? Any worries or concerns proved needless, as 'Curse of the Were-Rabbit' was a success on artistic and commercial terms.

One tangible sign of Aardman's international acceptance was in the stellar voice talent they had begun to attract by this point. Who else could have convinced Mel Gibson to play a chicken? ('Chicken Run', 2000). 'Curse of the Were-Rabbit' lured in the likes of Ralph Fiennes (as an upper-class game hunter) and Helena Bonham Carter (as aristocrat Lady Tottington), alongside the ever-dependable Liz Smith and Peter Kay. Geraldine McEwan was even enticed back to reprise her role as Miss Thripp in the team's next W&G short, 'A Matter of Loaf and Death' three years later.

The scripted content this star cast was handed to work with is typically full of fun, again in that revered Aardman manner of not treating any situation seriously, seeking out silly puns and gags whenever possible, and playing up the cosy 'Englishness' of it all while simultaneously parodying that same form. Wallace sets up a pest control business named 'Anti Pesto', and vegetable references abound, notably Fiennes' use of '24-carrot' golden bullets; the originally-mooted title had been 'The Great Vegetable Plot', a double-meaning too far for Aardman's American partners Dreamworks (though a verbal "arson" / "arsin' around" gag made it through quality control, to the evident delight of every five-year-old in the audience!). For older viewers the blatant steal from the spectacular 'An American Werewolf in London' transformation set-piece will bring satisfied nods of recognition.

Dreamworks' brief partnership with Aardman was dissolved after both this and 2006's 'Flushed Away' failed to meet expectations at the U.S. box office (with Aardman also reportedly unhappy at relinquishing certain aspects of creative control), but home crowds have continued to support Nick Park and the gang. 'Arthur Christmas' (2011), the wonderful 'The Pirates! In an Adventure with Scientists' (2012), 'Shaun the Sheep Movie' (2015) and this year's prehistoric football romp 'Early Man' have furthered the success and reputation of our premier animation house – long may they (chicken) run!

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