

# King of the Yellow Brick Road

DiCaprio's charm provides plenty of laughs in *Catch Me If You Can*

REVIEW BY STEVE RAMOS

There's one primary reason why Leonardo DiCaprio constantly finds his picture in the papers and his life the topic of gossip columns. He's charismatic, engaging and chock-full of spirit.

Basically, DiCaprio is larger than life in a golden-age movie star kind of way, and his acting peers, both on and off screen, look tiny by comparison. He has gusto, and the same thing can be said for teen-age con man Frank W. Abagnale, who passed himself off as an airline pilot, a doctor and a lawyer while cashing over \$2.5 million in forged checks before his 21st birthday.

DiCaprio is gaining plenty of attention for his role as a gang leader in the period epic *Gangs of New York*, but his performance as Abagnale in *Catch Me If You Can* is better. DiCaprio is completely convincing as the cocksure Abagnale, despite the fact that he's 10 years older. His boyish face is put to perfect use.

Abagnale is a tailor-made role for DiCaprio, and his jokey swagger is the driving force behind director Steven Spielberg's breezy road comedy. DiCaprio's smooth-talking charm is the source of many of the film's laughs. He's funny, so much so that I think he should put drama temporarily aside for screen comedy.

In one of the film's funniest scenes, Abagnale sidesteps his main adversary, FBI Agent Carl Hanratty (Tom Hanks), by impersonating a Pan Am pilot and strutting through the Miami airport with a crowd of pretty stewardesses on each arm. You can sense the playfulness in Abagnale's eyes, despite his clunky aviator sunglasses. He's putting his life on the line and having a great time doing it.

*Catch Me If You Can* is the second film from Spielberg this year, and it's worlds apart from his dark science fiction thriller *Minority Report*. In fact, *Catch Me If You Can* is the most spontaneous and funniest film he's ever made.

*Minority Report*, like Spielberg's futuristic Pinocchio tale *A.I.*, challenges audiences with ethical and philosophical questions. But *Catch Me If You Can* has a simpler goal — to make audiences laugh. *Catch Me If You Can* is not some Spielberg epic like *Saving Private Ryan* or *Schindler's List*, and it's a better film for it.

Based on Abagnale's memoir, *Catch Me If You Can* follows the escapades of its teen-age rogue as he crisscrosses the United States forging checks and reinventing himself. Abagnale is on a roller coaster ride of pretty women and luxurious living, and he doesn't know how to get off or whether he wants to.

Christopher Walken flashes plenty of charm as Abagnale's father. He's visibly impressed by his son's con-artist ways, and the scenes with Walken, especially one where he shares his secret for smooth talking the ladies, are some of the film's best.

Veteran French actress Natalie Bay adds a streak of heartache to the film as Abagnale's mother. Martin Sheen delivers some big laughs as a conservative New Orleans

District Attorney whose daughter Brenda (Amy Adams) falls in love with Abagnale.

Adams makes the most of her supporting role as Abagnale's fiancée. She's believably innocent, and her naïveté brings out a different side to Abagnale's character. She makes Brenda more than window-dressing, and that's quite an accomplishment.

Hanks is dry and solemn as a workaholic FBI agent. He plays the straight man to DiCaprio's charismatic womanizer. He's the second banana, and his deadpan humor is well suited for the role.

Hanks showed his serious side earlier this year playing a mob enforcer in the Depression-era drama *Road to Perdition*, but his *Catch Me If You Can* performance is just as satisfying. He makes good use of his round face and eagle-eyed stare. He even brings some subtle changes to Hanratty, slowly shifting him from Abagnale's adversary to an unexpected friend.

DiCaprio stumbled in his previous performance as an American traveler in search of paradise in director Danny Boyle's 2000 drama *The Beach*. He's surprisingly straightforward in *Gangs of New York*, failing to bring the zest that his 1860s gang leader character requires.

In *Catch Me If You Can*, DiCaprio runs with the recklessness of a young kid, and it's a pleasure to watch. His boyish face, soft shoulders and blonde hair give him the appearance of a teen-ager. More importantly, he possesses the confident swagger of one.

DiCaprio's comic spark rises to the surface when he's conning female bank tellers and hospital nurses. Early in the film, in one of its funniest scenes, Abagnale reverses a nervous day at a new school by pretending to be a substitute teacher.

In *Gangs of New York*, DiCaprio plays matters mature and complex, but at heart he's still just a rambunctious kid. In *Catch Me If You Can*, he gets to play the boy adventurer, and the result is the truer performance.

*Catch Me If You Can* has all the subtle details and technical polish you expect from a master like Spielberg. John Williams' cocktail lounge score adds to the film's bouncy feel. Janusz Kaminski's photography brings a colorful oomph to the film's 1960s setting.

My one problem with the film lies in its storytelling. Spielberg is too much the humanist to let *Catch Me If You Can* rely solely on its laughs. He keeps returning to Abagnale's emotional need to reunite his parents.

The film's family drama pales next to Abagnale's clever scams. It's as if Spielberg isn't content with simply entertaining audiences — he also wants to teach them some life lessons no matter how contrived they might be.

Still, I laughed out loud frequently watching *Catch Me If You Can*, and that's something I don't do enough at the movies. It proves that Spielberg has a sizable funny bone, and that's not to be taken lightly.

**CityBeat Grade: B.**



## ZEN AND THE ART OF DVDS

### Die Nibelungen

Unrated  
1924, Kino

If there's a precursor to director Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, the second installment of his elaborate *Rings* trilogy, it's director Fritz Lang's 1924 two-part medieval tale *Die Nibelungen*. Based on the Nordic Siegfried myth, *Die Nibelungen* was a mainstream epic targeted at mass audiences and proved to be a worldwide hit despite protests from Germany's left-wing community over the film's nationalist leanings.

The Nazis used *Die Nibelungen* as a tool for propaganda during its re-release in 1933, and it provides a valuable outlook on the culture that allowed Hitler's rise to power. A step away from its political subtext, *Die Nibelungen* remains a spectacular epic whose elaborate sets and camera effects hold up today.

Like the *Rings* trilogy, Lang used the best special effects available at the time and enjoyed a massive 31-week shooting schedule. Helped by his screenwriter wife Thea von Harbou, he adapted the epic poem into a tale of honor and blood sacrifice. The hero Siegfried (Paul Richter) must win a bride for his brother, King Gunther (Theodor Loos), in order to win the hand of the beautiful Kriemhild (Margarete Schoen). Betrayals and murder bring about Siegfried's downfall, and it's up to Kriemhild to seek revenge.

In one of the film's most dazzling scenes, Alberich, the guardian of the Nibelungen treasure, taunts Siegfried with images of wealth projected on the wall of Alberich's underworld cave. Siegfried reaches out to the treasure, despite the fact that he understands it can't be real. The same thing is true for the film's initial audiences, who were bedazzled by its trick effects.

Kino's stunning restoration of *Die Nibelungen*, restored on two discs with a photo gallery of production sketches and 100 minutes of additional footage unseen by Western audiences, represents the best potential of the DVD phenomenon. The DVD release brings some much-needed attention to Lang, who became one of Germany's most famous directors in the 1920s, escaped from the Nazis and struggled to reinvent himself in Hollywood. With the exception of *Metropolis*, Lang's silent films are obscure.

It's unclear exactly where the DVD revolution will or should lead us in terms of what we watch. Hopefully, other long-ago classics like *Die Nibelungen* will be made available to the public.

Blockbuster releases like *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* and *Signs* attract the most attention and shelf space at the video rental shops. Kids movies like *Hey Arnold! The Movie*, based on the popular Nickelodeon cartoon show, or *The Country Bears*, a live-action comedy based on a popular Walt Disney World attraction, also grab a sizable piece of the video spotlight.

Classic movies like director Sidney Lumet's cop drama *Serpico* and director Billy Wilder's Hollywood noir *Sunset Boulevard* recently enjoyed their DVD debuts alongside cult favorites like the vampire thriller *Near Dark*. Little-seen art-house fare like *Angela*, director Rebecca Miller's 1995 drama about a 10-year old girl trying to escape her harsh family life, discover a second life on DVD. Boxed sets including entire seasons of recent TV shows like *Once and Again* and *Felicity* and cult series like *Space: 1999* and *Thunderbirds*. The artistic potential of the DVD format is best revealed in *1 Giant Leap*, a compilation of musical and spoken word performances filmed in 25 different locations in 20 different countries around the world.

The most exciting prospect is the DVD format acting as film preservationist. This is the case with *Die Nibelungen*. It's a welcome chance to own a film that really matters.

*Die Nibelungen* CityBeat grade: A.

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