



FACT SHEET

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Media and Technology Charlie and the Chocolate Factory

Last month I began my movie crit. with the words: "today's movie is yet another remake." Well, I could use exactly the same intro for today's crit. Funny that. We could be inclined to ask "Why all the remakes? Can't movie makers think of anything *new* these days?" It's a valid question, but the idea of movie remakes is not something new – it's been around since movies were, well, old enough to be *remade*. The Biblical epic "Ben Hur", for example, was first made as a ten-minute or single-reel production in 1907 and then re-made, much more elaborately and at enormous expense, in 1925. The third version – the Charlton Heston one with the fabulous chariot race – was released in 1959. We're probably about due for a fourth attempt – Heaven forbid! It's been famously said that, in Hollywood, "no-one knows anything" – meaning that producers find it almost impossible to predict whether or not a particular movie will be successful. This perhaps helps us other mere mortals to understand why production companies tend to try to back winners by putting their money into well-tried concepts. Hence we have *Series Movies*, where the general idea is the same but the plot varies a bit – think of the James Bonds, the Rockys, the Missions Impossible etc. – or into *remakes* where the producers think they can make some predictions about the possible outcome of a new version based on the success of an earlier version. Remakes of a somewhat different kind are the Hollywood versions of successful *foreign language* movies – the Robin Williams movie *The Birdcage* is a prime example: a remake of the Franco-Italian movie *La Cage aux Folles*. The concept behind this movie was eventually well and truly worked-over with two foreign-language sequels and even a Broadway musical based on the original!

Can't they think of anything new, you might well ask? Well they do and, as we know only too well, the results are not always very satisfactory. Lots of new stories are turned into movies every year but many of them – happily – never find their way into cinemas. Appropriately, many appear to go straight onto the marked-down "ex-rental" tables in the video store and just running an eye over the titles and plot descriptions of some of these reject specials can make you think that re-telling an old tale is perhaps not such a bad idea after all.

And that brings me to today's main subject, the re-make of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. If you think you've heard something like that title before you're right, you have. The previous version of this movie – both of them adapted from a novel by Roald Dahl – was released in 1971 under the title *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. A little explanation. "Charlie" is the name of the boy who is really the hero of the original story. He gets to be taken on a guided tour of a mysterious chocolate factory by the owner of the factory – the very eccentric "Willy Wonka". Now we've cleared all that up.

I just described Willy Wonka as eccentric and *eccentricity* looms large throughout this movie. Let's start with the author of the story – Roald Dahl. Dahl was a highly imaginative writer with a taste for the macabre. If you dip into some of his short stories you'll find yourself travelling into

some very weird and often scary places. The chocolate factory story is no exception. It just stops short of taking the form of a kind of Grimms' cautionary tale set in modern times. Replace the paedophile witch in the gingerbread house in the forest with Willy Wonka and his mysterious chocolate factory and you're heading down the same kind of spooky trail. The movie *does* have a more upbeat conclusion than the Brothers Grimm would have allowed, but along the way we meet some fairly nasty people and observe a lot of rather unpleasant happenings.

Little Charlie Bucket, played with ageless wisdom by Freddie Highmore who was one of the stand-out performers from *Finding Neverland*, is certainly not nasty. Nor are his parents, charmingly played by Helena Bonham Carter and Australia's Noah Taylor. The little family lives in a tumble-down house with both sets of grandparents who are also very nice – if quite eccentric. In fact the only problem confronting Charlie and his extended family is grinding poverty. They exist on a diet of boiled cabbage.

What they need is for Charlie to win one of the golden tickets which will entitle him to a tour through the chocolate factory and the chance to win a further, much more valuable, prize. Fortunately, and rather predictably, Charlie wins a golden ticket, and he and four other children accompanied by a family member, are ushered into the grey and forbidding-looking chocolate factory by its owner, Willy Wonka, who escorts them on their tour.

The tour proves to be a bit like running a gauntlet and certainly a test of strength of character for its participants. It comes down to survival of the fittest character. Viewers familiar with TV shows such as Big Brother and Australian Idol will readily understand the format. Factory owner, Willy Wonka, is portrayed with great flair by the ever-young Johnny Depp, an actor of great talent who has a knack of finding his way into unusual characters. You might remember him in the strange movie *Edward Scissorhands*, or the bizarre *Ed Wood* or the promising, but ultimately dull and boring, movie about the legendary headless horseman, *Sleepy Hollow*. Depp was directed in all of these by Tim Burton who also directed *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Burton clearly believes that the silver screen should be a place to depict the landscape of nightmares. Another of his movies was entitled *A Nightmare Before Christmas*.

So I guess you could imagine that Burton was not the best person to wind up directing a movie which is being promoted as a movie for children. It's certainly a movie ABOUT children but hardly FOR children. Teenage children will find it tedious. Pre-teens will get a few guffaws out of some of the gross-out sequences – particularly those involving the fat kid who is constantly stuffing his face with chocolate. And little kids will just find it scary: the stuff of nightmares. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is rated PG – Parental Guidance recommended – and my recommendation is that parents looking for a good school holiday movie for their kids should guide their youngsters away from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

Now, let's see what they remake *next* month.

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