

Fairy Tale: a True Story

US / UK : 1997 : dir. Charles Sturridge : Icon : 99 min
 prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:
Florence Hoath; Elizabeth Earl
 Paul McGann; Phoebe Nicholls; Bill Nighy; Bob Peck; Peter O'Toole; Harvey Keitel;
 Tim McInnerny; Mel Gibson

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*Who's got a naughty secret then? Florence Hoath and Elizabeth Earl share a conspiratorial smirk.
 Source: Radio Times*

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 2001 review:

"Charming film, rich in period flavour, spun around a real-life incident in 1917, when two girls photographed fairies in their garden – and no less a figure than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle declared them genuine. As it deals with death (one of the girls has lost her father to pneumonia), the horrors of WWI, and real-life characters like Doyle and Houdini (Keitel), this may actually have greater appeal to grown-ups

than to children. Mel Gibson, whose company produced the film, has a cameo role. *** "

Radio Times review:

"This is based on the same source as last year's **"PHOTOGRAPHING FAIRIES"** – the true story of two little north country girls who, in 1917, took photographs of what they claimed were fairies in their garden¹. Were the pictures genuine? Actually, as one of the girls confessed half a century later, no – but this film seems to think they were. So, for that matter, did Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, played by Peter O'Toole. Indeed, a lot of quite eminent people were taken in, though not apparently the escapologist Harry Houdini. Here, as portrayed by Harvey Keitel, he's firmly on the side of the sceptics. A charming enough tale and children will no doubt be enchanted by the realistic fairies flitting about². But the plot, with its discussions of the supernatural and life after death, is neither one thing nor the other – too lightweight for serious adult consideration and perhaps too complex for the very young. Cert. "PG"
 – Barry Norman

"Director Charles Sturridge (**"Brideshead Revisited"**) brings a lyrical edge to this family tale, based on the true story of two young girls who, in 1917, produced photographs of a group of winged, fairy-like creatures they had taken at the bottom of their garden. The story follows the controversy that surrounded the pictures – were they real or faked? It's beautifully filmed,

¹ *Their father – an amateur photographer – took the photos, to be exact.*

² *Are boys still "enchanted" by fairies, d'you reckon, Barry? (Or even most girls, come to that.)*

with nice special effects by Tim Webber, and Sturridge infuses the film with a sense of wonder that contrasts with the sombre backdrop of the First World War. **** "

"Period drama based on a true story. In England in 1917, two young girls produce photographs of fairies, bringing them to the attention of Sherlock Holmes creator Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his friend, escapologist Harry Houdini. **** "

Beckenham News Shopper note:

"Wonderful film about the famous fairy photographs that fooled Arthur Conan Doyle.

This is a real quality film that children will adore. Don't miss. Cert. "U" "

Source uncertain:

"Based on the 1917 tale of two young girls who claimed to have seen and photographed fairies in rural Yorkshire. With Paul McGann, Peter O'Toole and Harvey Keitel. Cert. "U" "

"A cute and likeable film with excellent special effects but, like the fairies themselves, it's curiously weightless. Cert. "U" "

These bland contemporary reviews lose sight of the curiosity value of the original case. The photographs in question were, naturally enough, greeted with general scepticism but were indulgently sent away for expert examination. The photographic expertise of that time was unable to detect any sign of tampering or artifice – and it's that which ensured the longevity of the mystery. The public were not so much "taken in" as intrigued by expert testimony that there was no detectable sign of hidden strings, double exposure, etc. Conan Doyle, for his part, an ardent spiritualist, was used to examining rather more crudely faked "spirit photographs", but his natural inclination was to grasp at possibilities that indicated the existence of another world. Houdini on the other hand was irritated by the fashion for seances and the credulity of the "new age" types of his day, so he was on a personal mission to shoot down flying saucers of the spectral variety, whatever direction they came from. I find that element the more intriguing aspect of the story, rather than whimsical shots of miniature fluttering ballerinas, charming though they may be.

I did not see the film in its entirety, so a full review would not be appropriate. Abandoning mystery and an open verdict, it plumps in the end for full-blown fantasy, and a veritable battalion of faeries invading the children's bedroom. The Spielberg touch proved just too irresistible. Better, though less easily accomplished, would have been to preserve the ambivalence which kept this phenomenologist's anecdote alive for decades after. Appearing momentarily in the final shot, uncredited, is Mel Gibson as the father of one of the girls, missing (presumed dead) in the trenches. "I love your perfume" he tells her as she runs to his arms. "I'm not wearing any" she grins. "I know" he smiles back.

I'm not so sanguine that this is the kind of stuff to enchant modern children though – which included the sub-class "small boys" the last time I looked. A certain kind of child will find the notion delightful, as a certain kind of adult will, but that's as far as can be generalised. "**JURASSIC PARK**", "**TOY STORY**" and "**MONSTERS INC**" are more conventionally in tune with the imaginations of that age range today, I would think. What's more, although it's perhaps unkind to attach the criticism to this film in particular, its sensibilities reflect a trend in modern culture to drag childhood back by the scruff to the illusions and powdered hypocrisies of the Victorian nursery, a profoundly conservative protectionism of the hallowed state of childhood which that same modern culture has itself debauched and rendered obsolete. We raise our children in a self-centred, sex-saturated, consumerist tabloid environment, and then begin to hanker for the naivete and "innocence" of more sheltered childhoods of the past. It is false. It is self-deceiving, and wraps children in an aura of purity that is both dishonest to them and constricting of their freedom. It is, in short, the New Parental Way.

See also "**PHOTOGRAPHING FAIRIES**", and subject index under **FANTASY / FAIRY TALES / FOLK TALES**.

