

Welcome to Marwen: The Remaking of a Life

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In April 2000, just across the Hudson River from UTS's Barrytown campus, a terrible assault took place outside a bar in Kingston, New York, an historic city that served as New York's first capital.

Mark Hogancamp, an artist and showroom designer, was beaten almost to death by five young men using just their fists and feet. While drinking, Hogancamp had let slip that in the privacy of his own home, he was a cross-dresser. Taking exception to that, the thugs waited outside the bar and attacked him.



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Suffering extensive brain damage, Hogancamp spent over 40 days in the hospital, including nine in a coma, healing and relearning how to walk, talk, eat, and trying to live a normal life.

Fortunately for him, Hogancamp awoke with no memory of the attack — but he also lost memory of his past life. It meant he had to find a way to deal with his constant anger and depression — all of which resulted from his traumatic brain injury. Thus was born the tiny village of Marwencol.

Built out of plywood scraps and other materials he found lying around, Hogancamp created an imaginary Belgian village and populated it with Barbie dolls and World War II action figures. Daily life was built around World War II narratives that he created, featuring the women as a band of heroes led by one American soldier — Captain Hogie — going head to head with five Nazi soldiers in these different scenarios.

Marwencol became Hogancamp's therapy on a daily basis. It also became a way for him to find a new career. As he played out his stories through posing the dolls in Marwencol, Hogancamp began to photograph them, ultimately coming to the public's attention and establishing his career through gallery exhibitions that showcased his unique photographs.

This is the background story for director Robert Zemeckis' new film, "Welcome to Marwen," starring Steve Carell as Hogancamp and Leslie Mann as his neighbor, Nicol, who becomes his good friend as well as the inspiration for one of his female soldiers in Marwencol.

The film is very different from the other holiday film offerings of last month. For one, it is a biopic that implements innovative motion capture (CGI) techniques for much of the time to bring to life the imaginative stories of Marwencol. Hogancamp's real life story is presented in vignettes throughout the film so that the viewer needs to read between the lines in order to understand the link between Marwencol and Hogancamp's horrific experience.

The viewer might expect to see Hogancamp's story outlined in a linear fashion, peppered maybe with

vignettes of life in Marwencol. But if that is your expectation, you will be disappointed.

Instead what we see is the powerful role that people must have played in his healing process. The beating itself is, while not an afterthought, significant and yet not significant in Hogancamp's life from the perspective of the film. Yes, one comes to realize how brutal and serious the beating was. At the same time, we see how one man dealt with such a devastating life-changing experience and the struggle to make sense of his daily life.

Carell deserves an Oscar nod for his portrayal of Hogancamp and the almost daily mental struggle that must have defined the reality of life for him. Here is a man who has lost almost all of his memories — memories that defined him for all of his life up to 2000. He captured the intense inner and outer struggles of his character remarkably, allowing the viewer to get a real sense of Hogancamp.



The official trailer for "Welcome to Marwen" (courtesy Universal Pictures).

The film itself has received mixed reviews. While it will not receive award nominations for best picture or best screenplay, I did not find it to be a waste of time at all. Instead, I found the film to be a most creative way to interpret Hogancamp's experience. As a linear thinker myself, I tend toward films that tell a story in a straightforward manner. Normally I would have a problem with a film like this. But Zemeckis challenged me to suspend my usual perspective and hear the inner storyline and inner dialogue that was present.

What was most interesting was the intertwining of being able to portray the strength of the women figures in Marwencol and their ability to take charge and do what had to be done to fight off the "enemy" soldiers while being actual Barbie dolls and what that means physically; and a script that made use of language that we do not hear in today's society. At first, I was surprised and disappointed with the use of words such as "dames" — a term that was widespread in the 1940s but today would be viewed as uncomplimentary.

I also struggled with some other similar situations involving how the "women" were dressed and the seeming contradictions with the high regard with which Hogancamp viewed women. But on reflection, I realized that as a victim of traumatic brain injury, it is not uncommon for the person to have such contradictory experiences due to the damage of the pre-frontal cortex areas of the brain — the seat of our higher thinking function and executive decisions. There is often a loss of one's social filter when there is such severe brain damage. Once I understood Hogancamp's context, I could suspend some of my perceptions.

Zemeckis has a long line of successful and award-winning films behind him, including "Forrest Gump," the "Back to the Future" trilogy, and the live-action/animated "Who Framed Roger Rabbit." Is this film one of them? No. The script could be better and there are a few loose ends and scenes that leave you hanging because they are either unresolved or are not well-connected to the story line, such as the mysterious witch, Deja Thoris.

Overall, though, I believe the film is worth seeing. While I enjoy films that have strong scripts, characters and storylines, I also want to see films that bring to light real people struggling with real life because such stories can be as thought-provoking as Oscar-winning films to me. Besides the excellent performance of Steve Carell, "Welcome to Marwen" does show the power of human resiliency, especially after heinous acts such as experienced by Mark Hogancamp. His ability to come back and rebuild his life is something we can all learn how to do better.

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“Welcome to Marwen” (rated PG-13) is still in a few theaters; digital and disc release expected in March. Running time: 116 minutes. Directed by Robert Zemeckis; written by Robert Zemeckis and Caroline Thompson. Main cast: Steve Carell, Leslie Mann, Diane Kruger, Merritt Wever, and Janelle Monáe. See IMDB for full details.

Photo at top: Leslie Mann and Steve Carell in a scene from “Welcome to Marwen” (courtesy Universal Pictures).