

Brattle Theatre Film

Notes

A series of periodic film commentaries
presented by the Brattle Film Foundation



Drop Dead Fred

Posted on [May 20, 2016](#) by [Kate Fitzpatrick](#)



By Deirdre Crimmins

I choose to believe in Drop Dead Fred.

Fred (Rik Mayall) is the central imaginary friend in 1991's universally panned **DROP DEAD FRED**. The production quality is lackluster, the score hokey, the negative characters are caricatures, the premise odd, and I can only imagine that this adult film about imaginary friends was a nightmare to market, so much of the criticism is warranted. However, I can't help but adore Fred and the adventures he gets into.

The film spans decades of Elizabeth's (Phoebe Cates) life, both before and after her escapades with Fred. When we first meet her she is a small child with a terrible mother (Marsha Mason), and understandably she has an imaginary friend. The real problem is that Fred is a menace. He cuts Elizabeth's hair in her sleep. He spread dog poo all over freshly cleaned carpets. He stares up women's skirts. When he reappears to Elizabeth

when she is an adult, the stakes are higher because she has more to lose, but she also has much more to potentially gain.

Though the film is a tad heavy-handed (most of the film screams for Sigmund Freud to join the audience with a bucket of popcorn), the struggle between childhood and adulthood is the one that always speaks to me. There are plenty of other films that either congratulate naïve characters for finally maturing (REAL GENIUS), or praise harsh ones for recapturing their sense of youth (A CHRISTMAS CAROL), but DROP DEAD FRED is different.

Elizabeth is not a typical child. Though she is the product of her emotionally abusive mother, beyond her circumstances in life she is an odd kid. In the very first scene of the film, before the crayon-animated open credits, we see her mother tucking her in to bed and telling her a fairytale. Just as her mother finishes declaring that they lived happily ever after, Elizabeth exclaims, “What a pile of shit!” Even when she is not swearing, she is articulate beyond her years, and she is generally quite calm and not playful when not around Fred. But when Fred is around, she gets to be a rambunctious kid. With her imaginary friend by her side she makes mud pies and plays burglar. Fred helps her find her childhood.

Conversely as an adult, Elizabeth is childlike. She has little autonomy; either her mother or her husband (Tim Matheson) makes her decisions for her. She even dresses and walks like a child. It is clear that she never matured beyond the era of her youth when she last knew Fred. This means that Fred’s reemergence gives her the encouragement and permission to explore who she is as an adult. Fred’s impish impulses do not complement Elizabeth’s immaturity with a penchant for maturity—he still likes to raise hell—but he is the only one looking out for her. Elizabeth’s mother wants to fix Elizabeth by turning her into an adult-sized mini-me. And Elizabeth’s husband just wants to quell her objections to his infidelity and has little interest in rekindling their romance. Her friend Janie (Carrie Fisher) is kind to her, but ultimately has too much of her own drama to offer the support that Elizabeth needs.

But not Fred. Sure, Fred wants to have fun and break some plates, but he most of all he wants Elizabeth to be happy. The most important part of this dedication is that he first asks Elizabeth what she wants. No one else in her life has ever listened to her, or even asked her about her own wants in the first place. He listens to her and comes up with ways to keep her on track. Granted, his ideas are not always aligned with the laws of physics or social contracts (he first wants to win back her husband using harpoons, and nets, and hammers, which he declares “a brilliant plan”), but his heart is in the right place. When Fred discovers that what Elizabeth wants won’t ultimately make her happy, he tells her the blunt truth.

In short, Fred is always what Elizabeth needs and just when she needs it. With Fred’s psychological convenience it would be understandable to read the film as Fred being a completely fabricated imaginary being. When in times of great stress Elizabeth’s subconscious could materialize Fred to have her deal with stressors she cannot handle. This would play into the timeliness of his return as well as the emotional education Elizabeth receives through the film. But I choose to retain a bit of enchantment and believe in Fred.

Beyond the practical evidence for Fred's existence (the young Elizabeth could never physically lift some of the things Fred assists her with) and the imbedded indications of his actuality within the plot of the film (Fred is part of a greater world of imaginary friends whom Elizabeth can't see, so his story is, by design, greater than her alone), believing in Fred is the essence of the film. Elizabeth spends a great chunk of her later adolescence and early adulthood denying that Fred ever existed, and she is miserable. It is only when she embraces Fred and internalizes the lessons he has been trying to teach her that she finds happiness and is able to begin living her best life.

Choosing to believe in Fred is choosing to believe in magic. It is choosing to maintain a sense of playfulness throughout life. This is what Fred helped Elizabeth achieve, and it is a lesson we all learn along the way with him.

Deirdre Crimmins lives in Boston with her husband and a non-spooky black cat. She wrote her Master's thesis on George Romero and is a staff writer for <http://www.allthingshorror.com/>.

ONE THOUGHT ON "DROP DEAD FRED"

Anthony Fingleton on [May 28, 2016 at 9:29 PM](#) said:

Dear Deidre Crimmins:

My name is Tony Fingleton, one of the writers of Drop Dead Fred.

I was extremely flattered by your review of the film and wanted to touch base with you.

When I was at Harvard in the 1960s, the Brattle was a revered place. It was – at least we'd like to think – where the legend of Humphrey Bogart achieved cult status.

Screenings of Casablanca were sold-out events and students recited the oft-quoted lines along with Bogie, the breathtakingly beautiful Ingrid Bergman and Claude Rains and the others in that iconic film.

A few years ago, another film I wrote called Swimming Upstream was screened to an invited audience and I couldn't believe that I had a film that was shown in the same space.

Drop Dead Fred amazes us who made it. The fact that it has achieved the cult status it has over the years is bewildering. We hoped, at the time, that we were making a fun film that had, we hoped, a somewhat uplifting message. It grew out of the fact that my eldest daughter had an imaginary friend named Sarah. I seriously thought there was something wrong with my child but came to understand what having an imaginary friend was all about. And hence the movie idea was born.

It was not that well received when it first came out which, naturally disappointed us at the time but gradually, it dawned on us that we had created a film that resonated with young people in a very meaningful way.

It was certainly not a film without its share of faults – cinematically speaking – but we loved what it said.

Over the years, I have seen what the film has come to mean to a certain age of young people. If I had a dime for every time I have heard from men and women around the age of 25 or so that Drop Dead Fred was their favorite film of their childhood, I would be as

rich as Bill Gates. It always surprises me – nicely. Once, in a restaurant in, of all places, the Napa Valley, when I was having lunch with a friend of mine and told him about the extraordinary popularity of the film, he suggested that perhaps I was over-reaching. I asked him to summon over the waiter who was a young man in his mid-twenties. I asked the waiter if he was familiar with a movie called Drop Dead Fred. He looked at me and began to quote lines from the film. When my friend told the waiter that I wrote it, well, I hardly need to tell you what transpired at that moment. What was good about all this was that my friend, to his amazement, acknowledged what I had been telling him was in fact, the case, he picked up the tab for lunch. Worse things can happen...

The cult nature of the film goes on. My grand-daughters consider it a personal favorite and have watched it numerous times. If they have a sleep-over at their house, it is the preferred film for them to watch with their friends.

When there was discussion by Universal films to do a re-make a few years ago, because Russell Brand had declared it to be his favorite film, the number of blogs from around the world numbered in the tens of thousands. Comments from "Have seen that movie over 300 times and don't touch it" to "It was the movie of my childhood" to "It was one of the worst movies ever made but I have it on my iPhone to watch when I feel a little crazy" etc, etc.

How does one explain something like this? I have no answer. We made a film. That is has attained something of a classic status and has had the impact it has, it very, very gratifying. We never had the slightest idea that that would happen.

We were lucky to have chosen Rik Mayall to play the lead. He was totally unknown to me at the time but he was well-known through a break-through television series called The Young Ones. He was innovative, slightly crazy and totally right for the part. We owe him a lot for what he brought to the role.

I have rambled on for much longer than I should think you would be interested in but I did want to thank you for the kind words you had to say about the film.

I only wish I were there at the Brattle this evening to watch it along with those who show up. I would have liked that.

Best wishes to you.

Tony Fingleton