

Antz [1998]

by

H. Arthur Taussig, Ph.D.

Copyright © – 1993, 2020

Antz. Directed by Eric Darnell and Tim Johnson, Written by Todd Alcott, Chris Weitz and Paul Weitz. Distributed by DreamWorks SKG, 1998.

After being reassured of his insignificance by a psychiatrist (voiced by Paul Mazursky), an insignificant, neurotic but independent thinking worker ant, Z (voiced by Woody Allen), meets and falls in love with Princess Bala (voiced by Sharon Stone). To see her again, he trades places with his friend, Weaver (voiced by Sylvester Stallone), warrior ant, and gets swept up into a war against the termites and a military coup d'état engineered by General Mandible (voiced by Gene Hackman) against the ant Queen (voiced by Anne Bancroft). Mandible wants to establish his own nest based on military strength and discipline while killing everyone in the Queen's "weak" nest. Despite his ineptness, Z becomes a war hero. He accidentally kidnaps Bala and must survive in the dangerous world outside of the nest. After experiencing the glories of "Insectopia" (a picnic and a garbage dump), meeting waspy wasps (voiced by Dan Akyroid and Jane Curtin) and dung beetles, Bala is "rescued," and returned to the nest to face a forced marriage to Mandible. Z returns, rescues Bala and saves the rest of the nest from drowning. Mandible is defeated by his lieutenant, Cutter (voiced by Christopher Walken), who listens to Z's observations about nest politics. The Queen is saved, Z and Bala are reunited. (Rated PG)

Antz is not one animated film, but three. It is a delightful computer animation that is spectacular to look at no matter what is going on with the plot or the characters. There is the story for the youngsters: a boy who meets and wins the girl while getting involved in politics and saving the day. And, finally, there is the sly and complex political satire/commentary for the adults. Unfortunately, the three don't always blend together smoothly or comfortably and the film may lose business because it doesn't satisfy any of its audiences thoroughly.

One strong point about *Antz* is that it clearly breaks Disney's traditional stranglehold on animation. While Disney has provided us a number of masterpieces – *Cinderella* [1950], *Dumbo* [1941], *Lady and the Tramp* [1955] – the studio has, perhaps unwittingly, defined animation too narrowly. While Fox's recent *Anastasia* [1997] was better than Disney's *Hercules* [1997], it still had the same archetypal structure. (Disney's own *Toy Story* [1995] pushed the edges of the mold, but never broke through.) Mercifully, *Antz* has no cute sidekicks (who reached the insufferable stage in *Pocahontas*

[1995]. There is no Barbie-doll-shaped heroine. There is no butchered history (though insect biology takes it on the chin). And, again mercifully, the hero and the heroine don't break into insipid song.

Though whether the plot itself is archetypal or a pastiche of past Disney productions is up to you: there is the bored princess who goes slumming to escape stultifying castle life from *Aladdin* [1992] and *The Little Mermaid* [1989], there's the nonconformist from *Mulan* [1998] who ignores the dictates of society and saves the world, and there's the working class male who disguises himself as someone he mistakenly thinks might be attractive to women and wins the day as himself as in *Aladdin* [1992].

While there are no musical numbers as such, music and dance are at the metaphoric heart of *Antz*. Neil Finn's "I Can See Clearly Now," for instance, is used as a political comment on the hero's ideological growth. Similarly used are "High Hopes" by Jimmy van Heusen and Sammy Cahn and Lerner & Loewe's "Almost Like Being in Love" (crooned by Woody Allen himself). However, I would like to concentrate on the use and implications of two songs in particular, "Guantanamo" and "Give Peace A Chance."

Worker ant Z is having trouble coming to grips with his insignificance and inadequacy. During a rest period (everything in this society is structured, even having "fun"), he goes to a bar and has a few drinks (from the back ends of aphids). When a loudspeaker announces it is time to dance, the ant minions shuffle into orderly formation in echoes of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* [1927] (and its prescient view of Nazi rallies). As Orwellian signs in the background announce "We, Not You," "Freetime is for Training," and "Let's Work" (like Auschwitz's "Arbeit Macht Frei"), the ants plod along in tight line formation to a dirge-like rendition of "Guantanamo."

Pattern or formation dancing has a very long tradition, but what concerns us here is primarily its political implications. Line dancing is one step down the ladder of conformity and obedience from square dancing. Consider the political implications of the latter: Everyone obeys the dance "caller." You must instantly respond to his command. You, in tight cooperation with your fellow dancers, make beautiful and changing patterns which the dancers themselves cannot see. You are there only for the pleasure of the caller. If one person makes an error, the efforts of everyone are undermined. A better metaphor for a fascist worker-state is hard to imagine. This is what makes those beautiful formation dances staged by Busby Berkeley for his 1930s musicals so creepy – the women become objects, cogs in a machinery producing visual delights for the sole enjoyment of the viewers, us.

And if this is square dancing, line dancing is worse. In line dancing there is no caller, no observer. Memorized moves are repeated over and over (at least the caller could spontaneously change the order, exert some creativity, and keep the dancers on the toes, so to speak). The creative art of dance has been reduced to obedience in square dancing and even further reduced to mindless repetition in line dancing. In the state for

which line dancing is the metaphor, the workers have so completely accepted their lot that overseers are no longer necessary. This is what Z rebels against when he dances spontaneously with Bala.

Z's general dissatisfaction with his lot in life – he can't see life as moving dirt, he's the middle child "in a family of five million," he refuses to see himself as insignificant but can't find a role – is manifest as an unfocused anxiety until he meets Bala. It is psychologically appropriate that the feminine should focus and define clearly his (ant) angst and find a direction for the expression of his rebellion. He dances with Bala (in a sly rip on John Travolta's dance in *Pulp Fiction* [1994] which, perhaps coincidentally has a character named Zed) in a joyful improvisation. And immediately "Guantanamera" picks up the beat and becomes the peppy song we know. (In another modestly submerged reference to the film's liberal left political leanings, this song was written by Pete Seeger, the folk-singing standard bearer of the far left for several decades.)

Later in the film, a crowd sings "Give Z a Chance" to the tune of John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance." This song is more difficult to parse politically. In addition to a reference to another left-of-center songwriter, the substitution of "Z" for "peace" has some interesting implications. Do, indeed, Z's actions bring about peace? Certainly, a not-very-pacifist way to peace (we are so often told) is the overthrow of the military, and, in this case, to reestablish a more benevolent dictatorship. I am sure this is hardly what John Lennon had in mind. When all the dust has settled, the ant colony is not a democracy of any sort since the Queen is still in charge. (This reminds me of William Wallace's cry for "freedom" in *Braveheart* [1995]. What he was actually asking for was replacing *their* dictator, King Edward Longshanks, with *our* dictator, Roger the Bruce.)

These are examples of formicary politics according to *Antz*. In addition, this world is one of a rigid caste system (it is unclear how worker Z and soldier Weaver ever met and became friends). The Queen is the titular head of the colony, but the military clearly call the shots.

Other characters round out the film's political stance. The eugenics-inclined dictator-in-waiting, General Mandible, knows that a war the best way to intellectually anesthetize a populace while physically and emotionally energizing it. Our history is studded with many incidents that have achieved the same purpose: The Bay of Tonkin, the Maine, the Reichstag fire and so on. Mandible wants to instill a new world order by killing off the weak, echoes of contemporary ethnic cleansing and historical Nazism.

Mandible's right hand (?) man is Colonel Cutter, a morally ambivalent soldier (I realize that this may, in the real world, be an oxymoron). After considering Z's arguments about the relation of the individual to society, he turns against Mandible (at the last second). This has several troubling aspects to it. First, with Mandible gone, Cutter will be the obvious choice for General. So, while doing the colony a favor, he has pretty much assured himself significant job advancement. Second, what Cutter maintains is the status quo with the Queen in charge of the nest. So, all of Z's complaining and whining, not to mention all his ideas about personal freedom, have gone to naught. And, finally,

are we really to believe that the correction to military corruption comes from inside the military itself?

But there is more here than just political commentary. In the post-Modern manner, the film's humor reaches off the screen into our store of film lore external to the film. Much of the film's more adult delights comes from our knowledge of the cast. Can you imagine a live action film with the following cast: Woody Allen, Sylvester Stallone, Anne Bancroft, Christopher Walken, Sharon Stone, and Gene Hackman . . . all in the same film? Even more, can you imagine Woody Allen and Sharon Stone as lovers? Can you imagine, without at least a smirk of humor, Woody Allen taking the place of his best friend (?) Sylvester Stallone with no one noticing?

The oddly spelled name, *Antz*, describes the central character quite well. I assume that while most of us will pronounce it "ants," it should really be "Ant Z," for that is the hero's name. It describes his social position even among the lowly workers, Z – he is at the end of the alphabet, at the most insignificant position imaginable (something Woody Allen has cultivated in countless films). Yet it is good to imagine that stultifying conformity can be defeated by the triumph of personal determination balanced with group effort in this most American of Marxist/Leninist films ever made.

It may be one of Hollywood's best ironies that it took Woody Allen playing an insect (which many accuse him of being) to finally work out and solve all his nebbish neurosis, get the girl, and come to terms with the dominant social structure.

Antz. Directed by Eric Darnell and Tim Johnson, Written by Todd Alcott, Chris Weitz and Paul Weitz. Distributed by DreamWorks SKG, 1998.