

JUMANJI [1995]

by

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Jumanji. Directed by Joe Johnson. Screenplay by Jonathan Hensliegh, Greg Taylor and Jim Strain. Based on the book by Chris Van Allsburg. Visual Effects by Stephen L. Price and Ken Ralston. Distributed by Sony/TriStar. 1995.

In 1869, two terrified boys bury a box containing a magical game called Jumanji. A hundred years later it is uncovered by Alan Parrish (Robin Williams), the only son of a shoe magnate. Unfortunately, the macho father seems unloving and totally preoccupied with his business. In addition, the boy is tortured by his classmates. Alan and his friend Sarah play the game and Alan is sucked into a jungle world. Alan's disappearance is blamed on his father, who is suspected of murdering him. Twenty-six years later the game is rediscovered by two orphaned children, Judy and Peter. They play until Alan reappears, now fully grown. The jungle world of Jumanji begins to invade the ordinary world. To stop the assault, Alan must play the game to its conclusion. After a series of adventures, which include finding Sarah, a monsoon, an elephant stampede, carnivorous plants, and a white hunter bent on shooting Alan, the game is played out. Alan and Sarah are young again and Alan breaks the emotional barrier with his father. They grow up, marry, and even prevent Judy and Peter from becoming orphans. (Rated PG)

Considering how many times the “alternate reality” idea of *It’s a Wonderful Life* [1946] has been attempted, usually dismally, *Jumanji* does it amazingly well, with wit and originality. Interestingly, the special effects, which include most of the animals and plants, are not quite realistic – there is an edge, a tick which reveals their electronic origins. While this may be a defect in the computer generation of elephants and rhinoceros, it fits the film rather well since the animals are manifestations of something beyond the real. The film, both in story and in visuals, combines the normal and supernormal. However, as with all engrossing story telling – and *Jumanji* is quite captivating – it is people, and not special effects, who must be at the heart of a film.

The Jumanji game is simply a means of activating the players' psyche. It is a catalytic force, reaching out to a very specific type of person: orphaned, either essentially or literally. Orphans, physical or psychic, are the only ones who can hear the jungle drums of the Jumanji game – the living pulse of their own wounded unconscious. Judy and Peter are literally orphaned. Judy, perhaps as a result of the loss of her parents, has become a compulsive liar, while Peter hasn't spoken to anyone but Judy since the tragedy. In 1969, Alan's parents press him into the family tradition – a restrictive boy's school which seemingly all his male ancestors attended. He feels abandoned, with no chance to discover who he is or to live his own life. These are the apt subjects for this “game.”

At the end of the film, we find the game has been curative. When Judy and Peter play the game, Alan and Sarah, obvious mother and father figures, appear to nurture them. When Alan plays the game, he learns that some of his father's teachings are right while others are wrong, but that basically, his father's love for him is paramount.

A “game” that is curative? Sounds like something more is going on than meets the eye. The complexly boxed board game itself is loaded with symbolism, in addition to the obvious reference to Pandora's Box. It opens like an early Renaissance religious triptych. To the right and to the left are the instructions, while in the center is a green glass globe in which the cryptic, rhyming warning/instructions appear. Radiating outward are the paths on which the pieces move. It is a mandala surrounded by snakes.

The box and the game within clearly are representations of the unconscious. It exists in darkness and obscurity. It is buried, only to be unearthed a century later – a complete 100-year cycle. Young Alan hides it under the couch – again a metaphor for the unconscious. When opened, it releases something that is both wonderful and dangerous. It is for people who “want to leave this world behind.”

The jungle of Jumanji is the land of the primitive, animalistic shadow. Monkeys from Jumanji destroy towns. Lions occupy bedrooms, making procreation impossible. Elephants and rhinoceroses destroy cars. Giant mosquitoes, spiders, and carnivorous plants assault people. Our key is in Alan's description of the denizens of Jumanji: “Things you only see in your nightmares.”

But the function of this game is much more specific than a simple illustration of the threatening contents of the unconscious. The point of the game is to travel down the snakes to the central circle where the game is completed. Thus, one travels down a twisting path toward wholeness and growth, to the source of wisdom and insight. The game will not work without the quaternity – a balance and tension between similars and opposites: two adults, two children; two males, two females. Playing the game is a metaphor for the analytical process. One of the warnings is that the manifestations the “game” produces will continue to assault the player until the game is completed. Ibid. analysis.

Let us look at some of the details of *Jumanji*. In Alan's 26 years of existence in the alternate reality, his father and mother exhaust both their fortune and spirit looking for him. Father ignores the business, and the shoe factory collapses, and along with it, the town. Heartbroken, his parents die. I believe the key symbol here are the shoes that father makes. Shoes are often symbolic of point of view. Indeed, in Alan's visit to the factory, he accidentally destroys a sports shoe twenty years ahead of its time – the future. Alan's father blindly wants Alan to follow in his own footsteps, the old-fashioned point of view. And as long as he adheres to it, he is doomed. What father needs is a new point of view, a more modern one which allows Alan a modicum of independence, but he cannot achieve it and thus he and the shoe factory collapse. After Alan's curative adventure, a new reality results, one in which both his mother and father live and thrive. (Curing oneself always has a curative effect on those around you.) And the factory then makes new styles of shoes.

Jumanji is also full of little psychologically significant bits. In one scene, Alan sends young Peter to a woodshed to fetch an ax to chop him out of the floor in which he is trapped (you have to see it, believe me). Peter runs to the shed, it is locked, he picks up an ax to break down the door . . . and suddenly realizes that he already has what he needs. The psychological metaphor is pretty obvious. In another scene, Peter and Judy's mother intrudes at the deepest moment of involvement with the emanations from the jungle/unconscious. Since she represents the normal world, that is consciousness, she would only be a hindrance in dealing with the current problems, for she has not gone through, step by step, what the other four have. They, almost without even thinking, lock her in a closet. There is a point in the psycho-dynamic process where consciousness can only intrude and hinder, not help – another nice psychological metaphor.

The connections between the psychological and the social which *Jumanji* offers are also fascinating. Rioting and looting, the film claims, are manifestations of the collective shadow. While the film is about the usefulness of psychotherapy, it takes some swipes at it: psychotherapy turns reality into hallucination and vice versa. And the Great White Hunter is a delight. We assume that he is a remnant of Victorian England's Empire building, a representation of the dominant white culture's assumptions about manifest destiny, the privilege to dominate and kill anything they like, including other human beings. But *Jumanji* does not let us off that easy. When he runs out of cartridges for his antique elephant gun, he walks into a modern gun store, plops some gold on the counter

and buys the latest in automatic weaponry – no ID, no waiting period. Thus, *Jumanji* claims that little has changed in the past centuries in the area of interpersonal violence.

What takes it on the psychological chin in *Jumanji* is pop, positivistic psychology, the kind that comes on tapes with pastel labels. When the monsoon comes, Sarah, a devotee of psycho-babble positivism, says, “A little rain never hurt anybody.” Alan retorts, “but a lot can kill you.” That is, dabbling in any sort of interaction with the unconscious is dangerous if the flood gates are opened. In the realm of exploring the unconscious there is no such thing as “a little rain.” The wisdom of pop psycho-tapes really doesn’t help a lot when one is faced with the real thing. The four survive the monsoon, by the way, by climbing into a chandelier – a lamp, the symbol of knowledge and enlightenment.

Another interesting aspect of Alan’s journey is the breaking of the cycle of abuse from father to son. When Alan becomes the father figure for Peter, he hears himself mouthing the same macho mottoes as did his own father. In a touching epiphany, he says, “After 26 years in the jungle, I still became my father.” With this realization, rather than telling Peter that tears never do any good or to stand and take the pain like a man, he instead hugs and comforts Peter. The cycle is broken, not by 26 years alone in the jungle, but by simply and honestly interacting with another human being. This is reinforced by Alan’s comment that he feels safe in the jungle where he grew up (i.e., alone), it is “out there” (i.e., human interactions) that scares him.

However, things are not that simple. Father is not all bad. Alan, when finally facing the White Hunter, does not run. Quoting his father, he faces death like a man. Thus, father’s advice sometimes applies and sometimes doesn’t. Rarely does a film face such psychological complexity. However, by integrating both his father’s directives and his own independence from them, he is returned to his childhood world with the opportunity to relive his life and correct all that he has seen, using what he has learned. He repairs the relation with his father, he sets his father’s factory right, he saves the town, and he sets the relationship with young Sarah on the right track. For all the suffering and pain experienced in a psychological journey of healing, what more could one possibly ask?

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