Dumped By Her Prince, So Watch Out

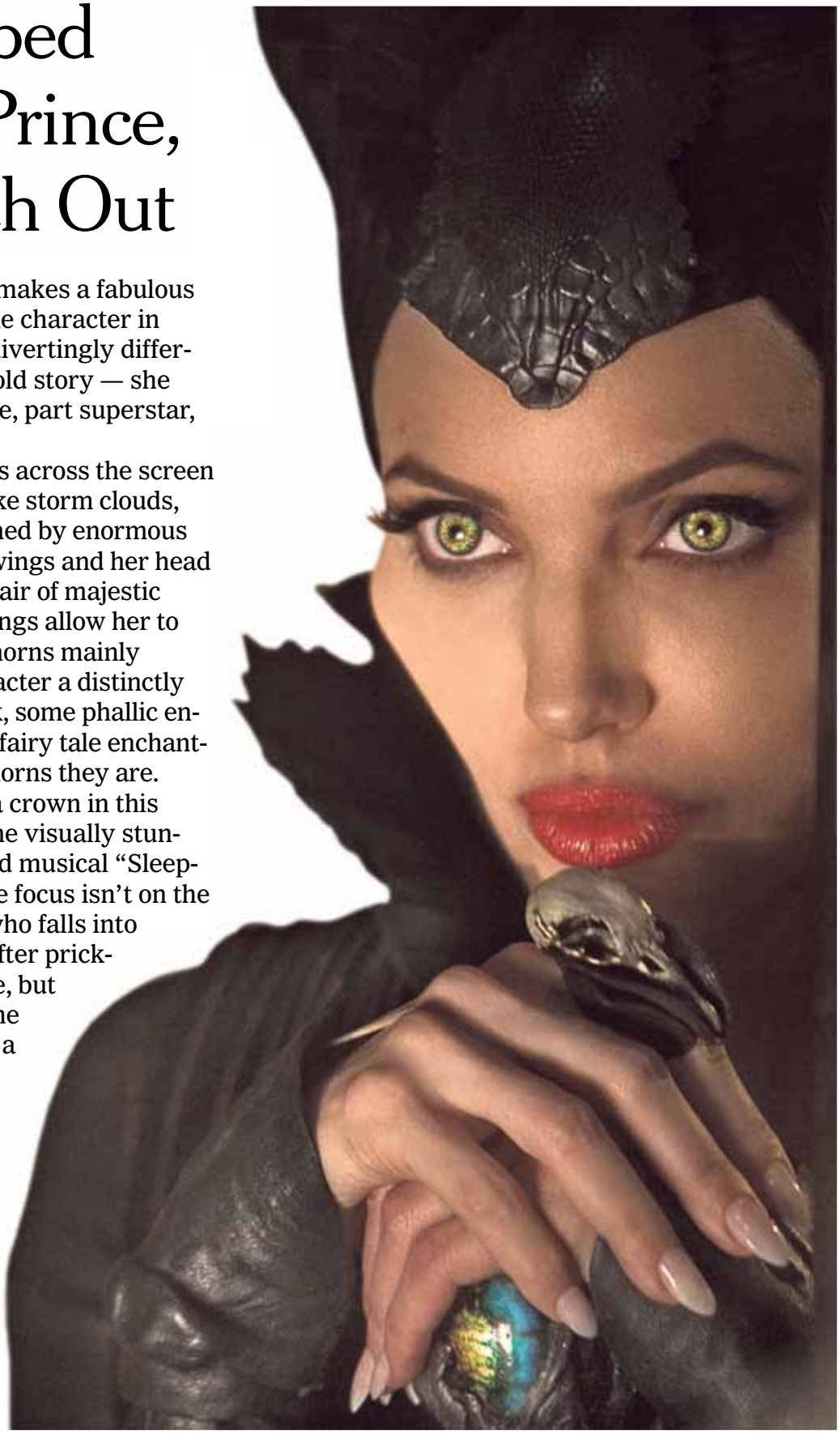
ANGELINA JOLIE makes a fabulous monster. As the title character in "Maleficent" — a divertingly different rethink of an awfully old story — she breezes through the movie, part superstar, part superfreak.

Her red mouth slashes across the screen while her clothes billow like storm clouds, her body framed by enormous shimmering wings and her head capped by a pair of majestic horns. The wings allow her to soar, but the horns mainly give her character a distinctly Freudian kink, some phallic enhancement to go with the fairy tale enchantment. And, my, what big horns they are.

MANOHLA DARGIS

FILM REVIEW

She wears them like a crown in this live-action postscript to the visually stunning 1959 Disney animated musical "Sleeping Beauty." This time, the focus isn't on the beautiful, blond Aurora, who falls into a deep, bewitched sleep after pricking her finger on a spindle, but rather on the sinister scene stealer who cursed her in a fit of pique and a puff of acid-green smoke. As it turns out, Maleficent (it rhymes with magnificent) had her reasons and a back story to go with them. Soothingly introduced in voice-



Maleficent *Angelina Jolie stars in this rethinking of "Sleeping Beauty," opening on Friday.*

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Angelina Jolie is the betrayed fairy, and Elle Fanning, right, is Princess Aurora in "Maleficent," from Disney.

WALT DISNEY PICTURES

over by Janet McTeer, Maleficent's story opens when she was a happy young fairy (Isobelle Molloy and Ella Purnell) living in, and flying over, the moors, a lush, computer-generated wonderland populated by cute uglies and delicately mossy, twiggy giants.

Trouble enters in the form of a human boy, Stefan, a farmhand who's caught pilfering a stone, a seemingly small act that reverberates as loudly as Klaxon horns. Maleficent forgives him; a friendship is born; time rushes by — it's obvious that the filmmakers can't wait to bring in Ms. Jolie — and the friendship evolves into a puppyish romance, sealed with a kiss. Stefan seems nice enough, if bland, and he's played first by Michael Higgins and then, briefly, by Jackson Bews. Before long, though, Ms. Jolie has taken to the skies while, back in the human realm, Sharlto Copley has brought the adult Stefan ploddingly, disappointingly down to earth. Casting is destiny in a lot of movies; one look at the twitchy, shifty-eyed adult Stefan, and it's clear that Mr. Copley won't be continuing the romance.

He doesn't. Instead, he betrays Maleficent and, in one of the movie's muddled sections, helps wage war against her land. Her wings literally clipped, Maleficent retreats into her dark place like a grounded Valkyrie, casting shadows over her world to go with her mood. Stefan assumes the throne and, years later, he and his forgettable queen have a child, Aurora.

At this point, the filmmakers pick up the "Sleeping Beauty" thread and begin weaving it into Maleficent's story, so, again, there are a christening and a curse, and Aurora is squired away by a troika of pixies (a tolerably amusing Imelda Staunton, Lesley Manville and Juno Temple), who raise her in a forest cottage. There, she grows up (and eventually into Elle Fanning) under the gaze of Maleficent, which is where this rethink gets going.

In broad strokes, "Maleficent" is Disney's latest bid to recast a dusty story for a contem-

porary audience, one that has, over the years, complained with good reason about the company's representations, particularly of female characters. For decades, Disney has responded with an array of plucky girls and women whose desires extend beyond romantic longing. Usually, they have adventures, and not just dreams, to go with their wasp waists and froufrou. Sometimes they save the day and their true love, which is better and more fun than waiting to be saved. Yet Disney heroines, whether princesses or not, have almost always ended up as reliably paired off as if they were boarding Noah's ark. A notable exception is Queen Elsa in "Frozen," a very different kind of heroine.

That Elsa remains single in "Frozen" has inspired some widely, wildly divergent readings of that movie, with some commentators claiming her as a L.G.B.T. representation, and others denouncing her for the same reason. It's entirely possible that "Maleficent," partly because it's narratively weak and Ms. Jolie is a powerful screen presence, will inspire its share of warring interpretations (and dismissals). The movie, directed by Robert Stromberg from Linda Woolverton's script, draws on Disney's "Sleeping Beauty" and Charles Perrault's version of the tale. Despite this, the narrative linchpin isn't Aurora: It's Maleficent, who doesn't fit the fairy tale template largely because of her relationships. Stefan angers her, but she so gets over him and soon shifts her attention elsewhere.

Mr. Stromberg, a production designer making his feature directing debut, does best when he scales down, as in the lovely shots of Maleficent walking next to a floating, unconscious Aurora, an image that telegraphs more about their relationship than any line of dialogue. The action scenes, by contrast, are visually uninteresting, borderline generic and unnecessary. There are also far too many long shots when the digital renderings (especially those with human figures) pull you out of the story instead of keeping you immersed. But there's so much to look at in the movie — from the wittily designed creatures to the shocks of bilious green and purple — that the battles quickly fade. (The colors are, as is a galloping race to the rescue, among the many nods to the 1959 "Sleeping Beauty.")

Ms. Jolie is, unsurprisingly, a visual marvel. Her face has been smoothed into an alabaster Cubist mask, and prostheses elongate her already sharp cheekbones; from some angles, it looks as if she had a second set of vestigial wings riding under her skin. The exquisite attention to detail in both the makeup and costume is routine in major productions like this one, of course, but the mixture of Old Hollywood glamour and contemporary fetishwear doesn't just turn Maleficent into a pleasurable spectacle, it also serves a character who embodies both the past and the future. Ms. Jolie's performance is similarly bifurcated, with a controlled physicality that, just when it seems to be edging into catwalk blankness, springs to weird life with grotesque facial contortions and spidery movements.

Bruno Bettelheim, that great reader of fairy tales, saw "The Sleeping Beauty" as a story of sexual awakening. She wakes only when physically and emotionally mature enough, when she is ready for love and its familiar handmaidens: sex and marriage. It's at that point, Bettelheim writes in "The Uses of Enchantment," "the wall of thorns suddenly turns into a wall of big, beautiful flowers, which opens to let the prince enter." That's quite the metaphor, but for women, it has sometimes also been a curse, including in movies, where they have traditionally had to wait for a man to get them to their happily ever after. There's no denying the attractions of that narrative for some of us: Even Lena Dunham got swept off her feet.

But, come on! There's more to life and certainly more to women, which is something that, however imperfectly, "Maleficent" grapples with. I'm still not sure if the movie's smackdown between patriarchy and matriarchy is the way to go, but at least nobody here is warbling about what she wants before hitting the road to self-actualization.

Consciously or not, coherently or not, "Maleficent" tells a new kind of story about how we live now, not once upon another time. And it does so by suggesting, among other things, that budding girls and older women are not natural foes, even if that's what fairy tales, Hollywood and the world like to tell us. And while that may sound drippy, it's exactly the kind of hokey that, movie by movie, may finally make a real difference. ■