



BFI FAMILIES

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activities and workshops



MATILDA

What's it about?

Young Matilda is a book-obsessed genius whose family don't appreciate her. After her parents ignore her plea to attend school, Matilda plays enough tricks to exasperate them into sending her to Crunchem Hall, which is run by the formidable Miss Trunchbull. A bully who picks on the weakest children, Trunchbull might have met her match in Matilda, who uses her telekinetic powers to teach the head a thing or two. Danny DeVito's adaptation of Roald Dahl's novel perfectly captures the dark wit and mischievousness of the book.

Making 'Matilda'

Mara Wilson's brilliance as Matilda came partly from inborn talent and partly from the experience of having previously appeared with Robin Williams in *Mrs Doubtfire*, and with Richard Attenborough in *Miracle on 34th Street*. When it came to casting the role, director Danny DeVito did not hold auditions. He explained: 'My short list was very short. In fact, there was only one name on it.' Fortunately, Mara was equally enthusiastic: 'I was in my room reading the script', she recalls, 'and I jumped up and yelled to my Mom. I was really excited because I loved it. I told her it was the best script I had ever read. Matilda and I are a lot alike, because we both like to read and we both like school. The main difference is that her parents are really mean and weird.' Matilda's mean, weird parents are played by DeVito and Rhea Perlman, who really are married to each other, and really are parents. Their motivation in seeking to make the film was that they had read Dahl's books to their own children and had become admirers of his mixture of humour and fright. In addition, they wanted the chance to work together in a film which they could enjoy with their own children.

DeVito's close knowledge of Dahl stood him in good stead, because he was not the only one who wanted to make a film of *Matilda*. Felicity Dahl, Roald's widow, had received other offers for the rights, but was determined to sell them only to someone who understood Dahl's spirit. When she met DeVito, she says, 'I realised that he was a genuine Dahl fan, who knew and loved all of the books. His warmth and enthusiasm were remarkable. Most of Hollywood was after *Matilda*, but I secretly slipped it to Danny, because of his tenacity and his love of the book.' Some directors of films based on a Dahl story have watered down the evil in the nasty characters, but DeVito was determined not to do that: 'There aren't any compromises in this film. There are a lot of whimsical, light things in the movie as well as strong relationships, but I never pull any punches. Dahl will lead a child's mind out onto a windy limb, and then suddenly he'll place the ladder underneath, the sun will come out, and the child will be able to get safely to the ground. Kids know that Dahl's characters are outrageous and excessive. In other words, they know that *Matilda* is a fantasy.'

The hardest task DeVito encountered in being true to Dahl was finding someone who could make the Trunchbull both funny and fearsome. 'I looked everywhere, at the most mountainous and powerful female wrestlers and bodybuilders that I could find. None of them could act. Then, unexpectedly, I received a video-tape from England, showing Pam Ferris in a stage show she'd been doing. I saw at once that she was the Trunchbull.' Thus Pam Ferris, best-known to millions of TV viewers in the UK as Ma Larkin from *The Darling Buds of May*, made her American film debut as the Trunchbull. In order to do so she had to accept long hours of daily discomfort – getting greased-down hair, a whiskered chin, and a form-fitting muscle suit. Despite that, Ferris says she enjoyed it all: 'I revel in the dangerous-edge stuff that Dahl wrote. As an actress, I love the idea of people not knowing whether to laugh at the Trunchbull or be frightened of her.'

Terry Staples, based on the *Matilda* production notes

Matilda

Director: Danny DeVito

Production Companies: Jersey Films, TriStar Pictures

Executive Producers: Michael Peyser, Martin Bregman

Producers: Danny DeVito, Michael Shamberg, Stacey Sher, Liccy Dahl

Co-producers: Robin Swicord, Nicholas Kazan

1st Assistant Director: Cara Giallanza

Screenplay: Nicholas Kazan, Robin Swicord

Based on the book by: Roald Dahl

Director of Photography: Stefan Czapsky

Editors: Lynzee Klingman, Brent White

Production Designer: Bill Brzeski

Art Director: Philip Toolin

Costume Designer: Jane Ruhm

Music: David Newman

Sound Mixer: David Kelso

Cast:

Danny DeVito (*Harry Wormwood*)

Rhea Perlman (*Zinnia Wormwood*)

Embeth Davidtz (*Miss Honey*)

Pam Ferris (*Agatha Trunchbull*)

Mara Wilson (*Matilda Wormwood*)

Paul Reubens (*FBI agent 1*)

Tracey Walter (*FBI agent 2*)

Brian Levinson (*Michael*)

Jean Speegle Howard (*Miss Phelps*)

Sara Magdalin (*Matilda, aged 4*)

R.D. Robb (*Roy*)

Goliath Gregory (*Luther*)

Fred Parnes (*waiter*)

Kiami Davael (*Lavender*)

Leor Livneh Hackel (*Julius Rottwinkle*)

Jacqueline Steiger (*Amanda Thripp*)

Jimmy Karz (*Bruce Bogtrotter*)

Michael Valentine (*Nigel Hicks*)

Liam Kearns (*Charles*)

Mark Watson (*Magnus*)

Kira Spencer Hesser (*Hortensia*)

J.C. Alexander (*nearby boy*)

Malone Brinton (*older boy*)

Marion Dugan (*Cookie*)

USA 1996

98 mins

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