

Fairy Tale: A True Story

Fairy Tale: A True Story sounds like a Disney animated kiddie flick, but the new film of that name, based on a real World War I incident, aims more broadly. While it stars two young girls and addresses the likelihood of real “fairies,” this is not strictly a kiddie movie but rather another in a steady British tradition of films investigating childhood innocence, including films such as *Whistle Down the Wind* (1961), *Kes* (1969), *The Railway Children* (1970), *The Secret Garden* (1993), and *The Little Princess* (1995).

The real incident, which took place in 1917, involved a set of photos taken by two girls which showed them posed with wee fairy figures. Published in a London magazine together with an article by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the images caused a sensation--and a frenzied effort to corroborate the story. The film focuses on the girls, 12-year-old Elsie Wright (Florence Hoath) and her eight-year-old cousin Frances Griffiths (Elizabeth Earl), who comes to stay with the Wright family in rural Yorkshire while her father fights in the Great War. The girls, staunch believers in fairies, capture the pixies with Elsie’s father’s camera, and the photos come to the attention of Sherlock Holmes’ creator (played by Peter O’Toole) who had taken up an interest in spiritualism. Around to proffer skepticism about the affair is Harry Houdini (Harvey Keitel). A curious and cynical world invades the girls’ home--and the fairies lair--but the tiny beings triumph by ushering in the return of Frances’ father.

The youngsters, the core of the movie, are winning but stoic types (avoiding the typical smarty-pants demeanor shown by their American counterparts). As is often the case with British filmmaking pros (the film was directed by veteran Charles Sturridge), the period detail and look is authentic and impeccable, with burnished interiors and rapturous glades. The two veteran stars do well in supporting roles, with Keitel an especially appealing Houdini.

One of the best things about the film is the fairies’ presence itself. The sprites appear sparingly, yet are the more effective for that, and their flying effects--spilling over treetops and skipping ponds--are most effective. Best of all, the finale, when the fairies, attracted by the girls’ faith in them, literally take over the Wright’s home, is something rare in motion pictures these days: a magical moment.

(November 1997)