**Steven Spielberg’s adaptation of Roald Dahl’s classic children’s novel has premiered at Cannes. But can the film live up to the book? Nicholas Barber finds out.**

It’s hard to watch The BFG without thinking of ET. Adapted from Roald Dahl’s classic novel, the film is directed by Steven Spielberg and scripted by the late Melissa Mathison, who wrote ET, The Extra Terrestrial. Quite apart from the co-incidence that ET premiered at Cannes in 1982, the same year that Dahl’s book was published, you couldn’t ask for a better team to make a spellbinding film about a child befriending a magical being. The casting of the crinkly-eyed Mark Rylance in the title role is just as encouraging. But, as well-made and well-meaning as it is, The BFG stubbornly refuses to take flight. The big-screen debut of The Big Friendly Giant is a small disappointment.

There are signs that something isn’t quite right from the start. Spielberg shifts the opening of the story from a small village orphanage to a Gothic edifice in the heart of London, although it’s a London where there are vintage cars on the cobbled streets, where the pubs stay open until 3am, and where a British child uses the American term, “the boogeyman”. Dahl would have tutted at such nonsense.

The British child in question is Sophie (Ruby Barnhill), a spirited 10-year-old girl who peeks out of her dormitory window one night and catches sight of a lanky, 24-ft figure in a black cape, flitting through the shadows. Afraid that he will tell other people that he exists, the BFG – for it is he – grabs Sophie in his massive hand, whisks her across the sea to Giant Country, and deposits her in his cave (which is more of a high-tech Batcave than Dahl’s version).

**A squackling treat?**

The good news is that, as his nickname suggests, he’s a gentle, grandfatherly soul. The bad news is that the other nine residents of Giant Country are much Bigger and a lot less Friendly. With names ranging from Bloodbottler to Fleshlumpeater, they are all monstrous, bullying brutes who feast on children, so Sophie’s life is in terrible danger. Even in the book, the BFG’s decision to abduct her doesn’t seem too kind. But in the film, there’s an added bit of back story which it makes it seem so reckless as to leave a nasty taste in the mouth.

All of which brings me to snozzcumbers, the repulsive, warty marrows which are the BFG’s only food. They look splendidly disgusting in the film, but the dialogue doesn’t emphasise how horrible they taste, or how much of a sacrifice it is for the BFG to subsist on them, rather than snacking on human beings.

It’s a strange omission, but, in general, Spielberg neglects much of the humour that makes the novel a delight. Only Dahl’s fart jokes seem to have caught his attention, whereas the BFG’s glorious melange of spoonerisms, malapropisms and neologisms – his funny language, to put it another way – is nowhere near as jolly as it should be. Even when he describes things as “delumptious”, “wondercrump” and “squackling”, Rylance makes the words sound so melancholy that he could be reciting a Hamlet soliloquy.

The BFG is curiously slow and downbeat for a children’s fantasy-adventure film. Spielberg does a typically marvellous job of showing us how the BFG fishes for dreams in a mystical pool, and he enjoys Sophie’s plan to defeat the child-chomping ogres, but he depicts these wonders in no particular order and with no momentum. The friendship between Sophie and the BFG isn’t very joyous, either, largely because, while she is a flesh-and-blood person, he is a rubbery cartoon character. Like his fellow giants, he is rendered via performance-capture technology, so his face is spookily similar to Rylance’s, but the rest of him could have been made out of plasticene. Coming so soon after The Jungle Book took CGI to photorealistic new heights, there’s no excuse for a Disney blockbuster to have such dated digital imagery.

There are times during the BFG when you remember that Spielberg didn’t just make ET, The Extra Terrestrial, he also made Pan, so not every one of his forays into this genre is a masterpiece. His new film is closer to that earlier hit than his later flop, but it isn’t the delumptious, wondercrump, squackling treat that we were expecting.