

'Arthur the King' fails to pull at the heartstrings

Written by gallupsun
Saturday, 16 March 2024 11:24

Rating: 2 out of 4

Running Time: 107 minutes

This motion picture from Lionsgate Films opened exclusively at theaters on Friday, March 15.

In 2016, a biography about the leader of a Swedish adventure racing team was published. It stated that during a competition, the man encountered a local dog who traveled with the group and formed a personal bond with them. Arthur the King is an Americanized, exaggerated version of the story that tries very hard to pull on the heartstrings. It does have some sweet moments, but this adaptation never really feels convincing or strains to involve viewers on an emotional level.

After ignoring his team and embarrassing himself during an Adventure Racing World Championship, Michael Light (Mark Wahlberg) spends the next three years regretting his mistakes. Nearing the end of his competitive career without a win, his understanding wife Helena (Juliet Rylance) allows him to give it one last go. After gaining sponsorship for the yearly competition, he recruits new teammates Olivia (Nathalie Emmanuel) and Chik (Ali Suliman), along with ex-pal Leo (Simu Liu) from the previous fiasco. The race involves an arduous, 435-mile journey across the Dominican Republic involving trekking and various modes of

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transport like bikes, kayaks and more.

But along the way, Michael's team crosses paths with a badly wounded stray dog, who follows them. The animal is soon given the name Arthur and he ultimately changes the athlete's outlook on not only the contest, but his own priorities.

The movie doesn't spend a lot of time developing the lead characters, only giving the broadest of strokes. Michael is shown as a man overly obsessed with winning, while Chik aims to prove himself to the current champions who cut him from their roster. Olivia is racing for her father and Leo serves as the media-obsessed foil for the protagonist, questioning the leader's every call.

And that's about it. In fact, more time is spent anthropomorphizing Arthur, who is given a scene avoiding and outsmarting a snarling pack of strays. Perhaps just as oddly, the filmmakers provide only a second or two with the lead's race competitors, who throw a verbal jab or two at the team but otherwise remain well in the background.

The protagonists also bluntly state their thoughts and feelings about their challenges as they pop up. Perhaps intense races aren't a place for subtlety, but several lines come across as jarring. This lack of character detail doesn't add a great deal of tension or conflict to the proceedings. And for those who don't know a lot about extreme sports, it isn't even clear initially on the specifics of what the Adventure Racing World Championship entails (you can thank me for giving you a few details in this review).

Big-eyed pooch Arthur is likable and his interactions with Michael and the crew are, at times, entertaining. The film also benefits from pretty photography of the Dominican Republic. There are a couple of race-related moments that, even if they aren't intense, at least start to get pulses pounding. A few shots of bikes hurtling down a mountain and another involving the team crossing a valley in the jungle using an unusual mode of transport efficiently displays how treacherous and potentially dangerous things can get.

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Yet the story is never engrossing enough to feel authentic or truly engaging. And the post-race material is even more over-the-top. The film continues well past the finish line as Michael and the others are given a diagnosis on the animal's condition. While well-intentioned, the overly earnest emotional outbursts that follow are about as subtle as a bag of hammers being dropped on one's head.

These criticisms are a little rough. Arthur the King is polished-looking and there are a few fun moments. Wahlberg does his best to show his character growth, understanding that care and compassion for both his canine co-star and team is essential to feeling fulfilled.

The movie certainly has its heart in the right place and if you simply enjoy movies featuring close-ups of a cute dog staring into the screen, the picture may still work for you. But in the end, the majority of the race lacks urgency or excitement, and despite the best efforts of the cast the drama fails to be as powerful or inspiring as it should.

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