

'Strange World' brings heart, grand visuals

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Tuesday, 29 November 2022 12:55



Rating: <<<<

out of <<<<<<

Running Time: 102 minutes

This animated family feature from Walt Disney Pictures will be released theatrically in the US on Nov. 23.

Due to the pandemic, Disney has employed an unusual release strategy for its animated features over the past couple of years. Its previous title, *Encanto* received a brief theatrical run before premiering on the Disney+ streaming site only a few weeks later.

Strange World

appears to have finally set things back to normal, heading exclusively to cinemas. But is it really worth seeing on the big screen?

As it turns out, the updated distribution blueprint does highlight the movie's strongest element.

The story is set in an unusual community called Avalonia that is completely surrounded by mountains. Daring explorer Jaeger Clade (Dennis Quaid) searches for a way over the

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mountains with his crew and teenage son Searcher (Jake Gyllenhaal).

Unfortunately, the elder has a falling out with his offspring after a strange plant is discovered during the journey. Searcher and the crew head home with the find, but Jaeger continues and disappears in the wild. Twenty-five years later, the rare greenery is being farmed by Searcher as a power source for the community.

He lives happily with his wife Meridian (Gabrielle Union) and 16-year-old son, Ethan (Jaboukie Young-White), but his boy harbors his grandfather's bold ambitions. When their vital crop begins dying, Searcher is recruited for an expedition beneath Avalonia's surface to solve the problem. But Ethan also sneaks aboard with other family members in pursuit. They all find themselves in a bizarre underground world filled with unfamiliar lifeforms.

The human drama is very simple and focused on Searcher, Ethan and Jaeger. This is essentially a story about fathers pushing their kids to be someone they simply aren't. The movie focuses on this element and repeats it throughout.

The trip to new lands reinvigorates insecurities and past gripes between Searcher and his son, as well as those with his own father. While familiar, they are all sensitively handled and effectively imply that while the characters may not see eye-to-eye on a lot of things, they have their similarities and their passionate viewpoints are all valuable to solving problems.

As for the visuals, they are magnificent. The titular world is something to behold on the big screen, with incredible vistas and fantastic beings flying and wandering in elaborate wide shots. This is an unknown world composed of mostly organic material and the concept allows the filmmakers to get very creative with the look of the film.

A couple of the creatures stand out as well. A blue figure nicknamed Splat is exceptionally well-designed. Despite it being a blob of sorts that can only communicate through movement and gestures, it comes off as remarkably cute and manages to earn some chuckles.

Yet, while the movie looks stunning it still isn't quite ideal. There is conflict featured in the

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interpersonal father/son relationships and early on the journey itself is fraught with danger, but none of it feels as thrilling as it should. For all the family issues, no one really flies off the handle and all are remarkably level-headed and reasonable given the circumstances.

Truth be told, the sense of menace fades as the characters become less concerned about their surroundings and more focused on themselves. At one point, the script even throws in a comment to try and deflect criticism from this issue, but one still wishes there were more friction on display. In fact, had a specific character not flipped allegiances and instead kept hunting down the crew as prey, it might have added more anxious moments (and dark humor).

But even if it isn't as pulse-pounding as it should be for an adventure story, the film has a nice message and is a visual wonder. And it attempts to insert a few unique components into its plot, which is admirable. *Strange World* may not end up getting the blood pumping, but it is a noble effort with some interesting facets and plenty of epic compositions that will wow viewers.

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