Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««««

out of «««««

Running Time: 118 minutes

This motion picture is playing in select markets and will be available to stream on Netflix on Friday, Dec. 9.

In North America, it’s unusual to see an animated film that isn’t aimed directly at kids. *Guillermo del Toro’s Pinocchio*
is a real anomaly of sorts. The classic story has not only been given a darker edge, but it also includes a new and somewhat grisly subplot.

While changes have occurred, the movie doesn’t alter the most important elements of the original tale. Primarily, ideas about the definition of humanity, as well as the joy and sacrifice experienced in life. It’s a visually dazzling and memorable adaptation.

The narrative begins with a flashback of Italian woodcarver Geppetto (David Bradley) during happier times. After a horrific tragedy, the old man spends years suffering from loneliness and depression.

Years later, in a drunken state, the figure chops down a nearby tree. This act startles Sebastian J. Cricket (Ewan McGregor), who watches as Geppetto carves a small boy out of the wood called Pinocchio (Gregory Mann). When a spirit appears and brings the design to life, further complications arise.

Sebastian is asked to watch over the naïve, disobedient and impulsive puppet. A sober Geppetto is disturbed by his creation (who has a dramatically different personality from the person who inspired it). With the country under fascist rule, local official Podesta (Ron Perlman) takes an interest in Pinocchio. As this occurs, the wooden boy struggles as he yearns to be human and experience all that it entails.

This film employs stop-motion animation throughout, providing a unique and striking appearance to the title figure. Pinocchio has an unfinished appearance which matches the character, who appears without having developed concepts of right and wrong or the world around him. In fact, all the individuals look more grizzled, worn and distinctive. The locations, from the countryside, village and roving carnival, to new elements like a training facility, are also vividly captured and, on occasion, even threatening.

There is so much detail on display that one could just admire the incredible images on display.

Thankfully, there is more to this adaptation than visuals. The darker approach to the material adds more tension to the proceedings and raises the stakes. Still, despite the tonal shift, the movie still manages to land a lot of inventive humor.

Sebastian is very funny as the insect voice attempting to guide Pinocchio. McGregor delivers some very funny comments on fantastic events as they are occurring and also is the source of an amusing running gag involving his character being repeatedly swatted at and nearly crushed.

The era shift and added story elements are initially jarring, but soon make sense in terms of the story’s themes. It allows the film’s creators to add another strained father/son relationship and deal more explicitly with the nature of villainy.

One new aspect that really makes a positive impression is that of the Underworld. While not a part of the original book, Pinocchio’s encounters with Death (Tilda Swinton) are compelling. Additionally, a group of rabbits whom the puppet also meets make a memorable impression.

Alas, fans of the fable will not see a couple of famous elements, including a notable island from previous adaptations. The notable growing nose characteristic isn’t as prominent here and this version doesn’t take an interest in any of the other creatures featured in the original book. It is strange that after all this time and so many films about the subject, it doesn’t seem like there has even been a version containing all the fantastic beings contained in the original novel.

But that is a minor quibble. The omissions are forgiven when there is so much new material on display that works.

Guillermo del Toro’s Pinocchio is a vibrant new take on the classic. And it does emphasize the significant themes and messages of the famous tale, which is something that the recent live-action Disney edition did not accomplish.

This feature is grim at times and is not for small children. However, it will intrigue and make an impression on older kids and adults wanting to see a beautifully animated film tackling life, mortality and how to be a real person.

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