The animated feature stands out among recent family films

Rating: ««« out of «««««

Running time: 89 minutes

Aardman Animations and founder/director Nick Park are responsible for some great little animated efforts of recent years, including the *Wallace & Gromit* series and feature film, the *Sh aun the Sheep*
spin-off and movie, and
Chicken Run
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Early Man
is the latest from the production house and it offers more family friendly fun, exceptional stop-motion animation, a sweet message and an eccentric sense of humor (with a few nods and gags for parents). It may not be the most daring or original work the studio has ever produced, but it's still a good time that will leave a warm smile on most viewers' faces.

The story follows a tribe of good-natured but simple cavemen living a happy existence in a green and protected valley. Things change when an army arrives, part of a Bronze Age kingdom controlled by Lord Nooth (Tom Hiddleston). The invaders take control of the area and eject the prehistoric heroes into the volcanic badlands. After an accident, a young caveman named Dug (Eddie Redmayne) finds himself in the empire's most cherished and worshipped place... a soccer stadium. Believing that his ancestors invented the game, Dug challenges the kingdom's star team to a winner-take-all match for the valley. In over his head, he enlists the help of Goona (Maisie Williams), a local who has always dreamed of playing, but who is banned from the game due to her gender. Together, they try to teach and inspire the confused cavemen into upsetting the champs.

In essence, this is more of a soccer movie than a prehistoric adventure and admittedly the movie may play better to those familiar with the sport. Much of the humor comes from exaggerated visual gags involving training sessions among the volcanoes, cavemen (and a wild boar) wearing team uniforms and some soccer-themed cave painting displaying the agony and ecstasy of the game. There are even some amusing, intentional groaners and puns tying in to modern clubs and technical terminology.

However, even if the subject matter isn't to your liking, there are a few funny sight gags to carry one through the events. These include a vicious duck that lives in the badlands and terrifies the tribe as well as a rock that a member of the group believes to be a living compatriot. There's a carrier pigeon that acts more like an answering machine than note carrying bird. And even if you don't like soccer, it's hard not to be entertained by the boar, Hognob (voiced by director Park), loosening up on the pitch and readying himself to play.

It's also a very sweet movie that takes a soft approach. Yes, the story itself is predictable and there aren't many surprises in store for anyone who has ever seen a sport's movie before, and villain Nooth could have benefited from being given more exaggerated and sinister actions. Regardless, the movie's low-key, quirky tone helps to subtly present some underlying themes. While it's done in a gentle way, the movie does impart positive messages on the importance of unified teamwork to overcome obstacles (whether it's the cavemen being exiled from their homes due to the actions of a cruel leader or the banding together to play against a squad made up of individuals playing for themselves). And it does delicately address the ridiculousness of sexism with its female characters every bit as important and valuable as the male members of the team. It's simple stuff, but welcome regardless.

The movie isn't always laugh-out-loud funny, but it is still far more enjoyable than the majority of family films that this reviewer sees in a given year. *Early Man* is a sweet and enjoyable romp that looks great, moves at a brisk pace and should consistently entertain the kids. It manages to put the ball in the back of the net with style and grace.

By Glenn Kay
For the Sun