

Isle of Dogs warms the heart

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

Running Time: 101 minutes

After nine feature films, director Wes Anderson (*The Grand Budapest Hotel*, *Moonrise Kingdom*, *Rushmore*) has a firmly established and distinct visual style, as well as an eccentric sense of humor that continues to help build on his already large fan base. After more than 20 years, his films still feel vibrant and fresh. The latest is a stop-motion animated film with photographic cues similar to *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, an earlier feature that dabbled in the same genre. However, with *Isle of Dogs* the subject matter is entirely original, adding an invigorating element to the proceedings. Once again, the end results are quite memorable.

The story takes place in the near future, although it certainly has something of a retro look to it. Concerned about a deadly flu affecting the canine population, the severe and somewhat sinister Mayor Kobayashi orders all dogs banished from Megasaki City. Forced to fend for themselves on Trash Island, the pooches live day-by-day among the garbage piles. When a small aircraft crashes on the island, a small collective of dogs go to check it out. They encounter the mayor's nephew Atari, desperate to find his lost hound. The group debates how to proceed, with many resentful for how they were treated by humanity. As this is occurring, Mayor Kobayashi readies his plan to get rid of the animals for good and a local student organizes a protest against the autocratic leader.

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As expected, the visuals here are incredible, from the grand cityscapes to the unique and bizarre garbage island environment. Naturally, the story involves the characters traveling on a quest and this invites all sorts of interesting new locals as the boy and animals make their way through make-shift homes and processing plants. One of the dogs resides in an impressive, colored-bottle structure. These striking visuals really stand out and make audiences excited for what might come next. It's a wondrous movie to look at.

Of course, without the voice cast and script, this would simply be a pretty movie and little else. There's an amusing little gag used for maximum effect by the filmmakers. Many of the humans speak Japanese (sans subtitles) while the dogs communicate in English, involving audiences in the proceedings as they have to figure out what the locals are saying. And of course, it also helps audiences identify with the oddball dogs.

Bryan Cranston, Ed Norton, Bob Balaban, Bill Murray and Jeff Goldblum handle their chores expertly, giving each character a little uniqueness that allows them to stand out. Goldblum has a particularly amusing running gag that allows him to deliver exposition in a very funny way... apparently, gossiping and rumor is common even among canines. Greta Gerwig lends her talents to the leader of the student uprising who helps to uncover the dark intentions of the government. There are quirky lines throughout from the entire cast that add plenty of chuckles to the proceedings.

The movie also has a sweet message about inclusion and even offers some of its less-than-hospitable characters an opportunity for redemption. It winds down and runs out of gas a little towards the final act, offering a softer, gentler resolution than one might expect. Still, it makes an appropriate impact. In the end, *Isle of Dogs* is a completely endearing and original animated effort sure to please fans of the filmmaker.

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