

‘Dumbo’ stumbles in some areas, soars in others

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

Running Time: 112 minutes

The latest Disney animated classic to receive a live-action retelling is *Dumbo*, the tale of an infant elephant born with enormous ears that give him the ability to fly. However, fans of the 1941 original should be forewarned. This take is very different from the original, meaning audiences may not be getting what they expect when the curtain rises. It has its fair share of issues, but there's enough good stuff in here to earn it a modest recommendation.

It all begins when ex-circus performer and WWI veteran Holt Ferrier (Colin Farrell) returns home to his troupe after years in service. Besides having lost a limb in battle, his wife has passed away, and proprietor Max Medici (Danny DeVito) reveals the show is in dire straits, leaving the future uncertain for Holt and his kids, Milly (Nico Parker) and Joe (Findlay Hobbins). Holt is forced to look after the company's big investment, a pregnant elephant. When she gives birth to Dumbo, Max becomes furious about the baby's physical abnormalities. However, the circus' fortunes change when the children discover that Dumbo can fly.

This generates interest and offers from entrepreneur V. A. Vandevere (Michael Keaton), who decides to incorporate the troupe into his theme park and develop an act featuring the elephant and his girlfriend Colette (Eva Green).

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Dumbo the elephant is extremely well-rendered with giant eyes and a sweet, timid disposition (and a bit of an obsession with catching feathers). It's impossible not to like the title character and feel for Dumbo's many hardships. In fact, one wishes that there was more of the pachyderm. The visual effects are remarkable and many of the shots of the animal flying through the air look fantastic and should please young and old alike.

The production design and stylized period settings are gorgeous to look at, from the wide open fields to the neon and art-deco inspired theme park. Another plus is some of the creative shot selection, including the camera following a train into a tunnel and spinning into a circus-tent-like pattern. Additionally, there is some great use of fish-eye lenses to show Dumbo's point-of-view, with many of the creepier circus visuals warping and looking even eerier to the title character.

While it's a wonder to look at, the earlier synopsis actually highlights the film's biggest issue. There are an awful lot of characters and subplots occurring here, too many to delve into and examine effectively. Some have great potential, like Holt coming to home and transitioning to life minus an appendage. He's a likable character and one that certainly relates to the animal on display, but the story doesn't have enough time to deal with this interesting material in detail, and so the character simply and stoically moves forward.

For this reviewer, the children are the biggest human element that doesn't work. They're in a large portion of the film as Dumbo's closest friends and co-caretakers. However, as characters they don't make an impression or do an awful lot to help move the story forward. They encourage the animal and offer advice to adults, but otherwise are spectators, in the end taking attention from the more developed parts. One assumes the studio must have insisted that kids be featured prominently in the story, but they seem extraneous here among the troupe.

At least some of the interspersed humor works well. The addition of evil entrepreneur Vandevere is welcome and he is a sufficiently sinister character. Additionally, some of the supporting bits, like standoffish financier J. Remington (Alan Arkin), get some very funny deadpan lines as things spiral out of control. It's also amusing to see a circus strongman Rongo (Deobia Oparei) taking on triple duty as a publicist and accountant for his failing circus.

In the end, the movie is overstuffed and there's a bit of an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink feel to the proceedings, which takes away from the elements that do work. Yet, I still enjoyed the film

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enough to overlook its failings and give it a pass for what was successful.

Remakes are a tricky proposition. Do everything as it was done in the original and you get slammed as a carbon copy. Make a darker and different movie and you're critiqued for not being close enough to the classic. *Dumbo* may not always work and stumbles, but at least it tries to give audiences something new, and in doing so, occasionally soars.

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