

'Onward' isn't always magical, but casts a charming spell

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

Running Time: 103 minutes

Sequels and remakes have made up the majority of films over the past decade, with even animated studios getting on board. Thankfully, not every single project hitting cinema screens is a follow-up or reimagining. The latest from Pixar is *Onward* and it's their first original work in two and a half years (*Coco* being the last title that wasn't a sequel). The family flick may not be the greatest work from the studio, but it is a beautifully animated and entertaining family feature that at least attempts to provide viewers with something slightly new and different.

The story is set in a magical world whose influence on the public has faded with the advancement of modern technology. Ian Lightfoot (Tom Holland) is a shy and nervous teenage elf struggling to make friends with his fellow students, and yearning to be more like his deceased father. Embarrassed by his rambunctious older brother Barley (Chris Pratt) who studies long outdated magic books, Ian finds an incredible gift for his 16th birthday from his dad. It's a magical staff that, when used with a special stone, can cast a spell and bring his pop back for a period of 24 hours.

Of course, unexpected complications arise when using the first stone and the two brothers are forced out on a quest to find a second stone that will reunite them with their parent. In the meantime, their concerned mother Laurel (Julia Louis-Dreyfuss) pursues the pair with a once beastly mantichore Corey (Octavia Spencer) who now operates a family-friendly, fantasy-themed restaurant.

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Like all Pixar movies, the visuals are pretty incredible. Everything from the fantasy-world-turned-suburban tract to the characters themselves looks phenomenal. There’s an incredible amount of detail on display that is continually attention-grabbing. This leads to some amusing sight gags as magical creatures are placed in what would otherwise be generic environments. Although it’s something of a throwaway joke, one bit early on involving a pair of unicorns is particularly funny.

A big part of the story also involves a set of phantom appendages and the script also derives some enjoyable moments from the featured limbs...even if some adults might find these jokes reminiscent of a popular comedy involving a flailing, deceased figure that was released back in the summer of 1989. The screenplay also gets humor out of Ian’s growing abilities, as he and Barley use spells to overcome great obstacles (another amusing visual involves what the pair use to help them travel along a waterway).

There’s also plenty of camaraderie on display between the two brothers, both of whom greatly miss their dad and whose unusual attitudes and behaviors are largely influenced by his absence. When the two share personal memories and the loss they feel as they desperately strive to be reconnected with him, it will certainly strike a chord with many audience members. And the elaborate climax also has a lot of heart and handles the unique situation well, not providing quite as straight-forward and clear-cut a resolution as one might initially anticipate.

Of course, things aren’t perfect. Not every joke plays and a few of the supporting characters don’t end up delivering as many laughs as hoped for. Although it likely would have slowed the pacing down, this reviewer would have liked to have seen even more technology obsessed fantasy creatures struggling with their somewhat passive and constricted roles in suburbia. And while the boys’ single-minded quest to be reunited with their dad offers plenty of material, it seems like their mother Laurel gets lost in the shuffle. She doesn’t know the details of what her sons are trying to accomplish and one supposes that she may have already accepted and have come to terms with her own personal loss.

Yet even by the climax, the character ends up coming across as almost uninterested in reuniting with her spouse.

Still, while it isn’t perfect, this is a gorgeously animated effort that will appeal to families. It

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provides enough enjoyable moments and emotional heft when it deals specifically with the plight of Ian and Barley to make it worthwhile. And it isn’t a sequel or remake. *Outward* isn’t always magical, but in the end its spell is charming enough to warrant a couple of hours of your time.

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