By Glenn Kay

For the Sun

Rating: 3 out of 4 stars 

Running Time: 95 minutes

This feature will be available to stream on Disney+ Feb. 19.

Over the past year, Disney has been premiering a great deal of its content on its new streaming service. While there have been some awards contenders like *Soul*, the live-action output from Disney+ hasn't always been as stellar. In fact, some of their 2020 titles (including *Artemis Fowl*, *Black Beauty* and *Magic Camp* to name but a few) felt like they had been relegated to the platform only to get lost among the studio's catalog. Thankfully, the new live action film *Flora & Ulysses* is an improvement over many of last year's releases.

It may not be a family classic, but it is a sweet and polished effort that should win over kids and parents.

Young Flora Buckman (Matilda Lawler) is a self-described cynic with no friends and plenty of family problems. Her mom Phyllis (Alyson Hannigan) is a romance author suffering from writer's block after a separation from her husband, George (Ben Schwartz). Aspiring superhero comic book creator George is also in a visible funk, seeing his dreams of finding success fading into oblivion. Simply put, everyone appears to be losing all the wonder and excitement from life.

When Flora witnesses a squirrel suffer a strange injury, she names him Ulysses and treats him in her comic book-filled room. As it turns out, the knock causes the abnormal critter to start acting out like a real superhero. But Ulysses is still just a squirrel, so he ends up merely causing trouble around town and attracting the attention of animal control specialist, Miller (Danny Pudi).

It's a very silly and simple concept. The movie and lead animal strive to encourage viewers to continue aspiring to great heights in life, no matter what the odds. Of course, this point is made explicitly and the feature often relies upon slapstick humor to get its idea across. This often results in Ulysses causing chaos, with many adults panicking in the presence of the wild squirrel leaping into the air.

The movie's depiction of a silent, heroic rodent ends up being funnier than anticipated because of the combination of its small size and grandiose gestures, which make for an amusing contrast. The CGI work doesn't always look entirely convincing (especially on a nasty neighborhood cat), but many shots in the film are credible enough to suspend disbelief.

In truth, the film's biggest benefit is its human cast. Lawler is a likable little kid who doesn't come off as too precocious. The young actress does a commendable job of selling her interactions with Ulysses, which is quite a feat when one considers that she's performing with a non-existent co-star. Hannigan and her silly novel titles also raise a smile.

Schwartz ekes out a notable number of laughs with his character's dispirited state. Some of his off-handed asides are rib-tickling and will land with adults. He and Pudi also do an exceptional job of selling several of the physical gags. As the two face off against each other over the fate of the rambunctious squirrel, a lot of tranquilizer darts are misfired, resulting in some entertaining

bits involving various body parts going numb at inopportune moments.

Like most Disney movies, the story does get overly sentimental toward its close when it feels obligated to deliver some inspirational speeches. Yet all the actors are quite likable and the story's humorous events are sold with plenty of vigor and pep. Ulysses is an entertaining little critter to watch, the movie looks slick and it all moves at a zippy pace. So, despite its more familiar story elements, this reviewer will admit that the film did end up charming him.

In the end, *Flora & Ulysses* is a family-friendly twist on superhero archetypes that will entertain kids and may even earn some chuckles from parents watching along.

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