

Visit Kumandra in ‘Raya and the Last Dragon’

Rating: ««««

out of «««««

Running Time: 108 minutes

This feature debuts March 5 at open cinemas and on Disney+ with Premier Access.

The two most recent features from Walt Disney Animation Studios were the sequels *Frozen II* and
Ralph Breaks the Internet
. It’s nice to see that their latest production,
Raya and the Last Dragon
, is an original and not another follow-up. It’s a beautifully animated fable that will most certainly entertain kids. Still, despite the fact that it is well-produced and isn’t a direct by-product of an earlier production, adult viewers may feel slightly less enamored with the predictable story.

This tale is set in the magical world of Kumandra and follows Raya (Kelly Marie Tran), a warrior princess from the kingdom of Heart Land. She explains that long ago, dragons and humans used to live in harmony, but that the serpents sacrificed themselves to save the world from a sinister, smoke-like force called Druun. These dragons created a gem with special powers to stop the threat, leaving it in Heart Land. Hundreds of years later, humans from various kingdoms have yearned for the gem's power.

When Raya is tricked by visiting Fang Land princess Namaari (Gemma Chan), the kingdom is suddenly attacked. The precious stone is broken into pieces, Druun is resurrected and the world falls into decay. Years later, an older Raya and her pet Tuk Tuk (Alan Tudyk) set out to find the mythical dragon Sisu (Awkwafina) and collect all the gem pieces in the hopes of returning the world to normal.

As mentioned, the visuals on display are remarkable, particularly when the characters venture out into the various kingdoms during their journey. There are impressive deserts, picturesque villages on the riverbanks and green forests that look greatly inspired by gorgeous regions in Southeast Asia. Everything about the feature's appearance is striking and the movie also features some impressive shots of Raya racing through the desert on Tuk Tuk and fending off the Druun and villains out to collect gem fragments for themselves.

As a magical travelogue, it's all first-rate.

The protagonist's travels should offer thrills and laughs and it does to a degree, although much of the humor is hit-and-miss. When Sisu the dragon appears, she is revealed to be a goofy serpent who isn't as quick-witted as expected. This character trait does add humor to the proceedings, although it does become tiring to see the figure repeat the same errors again and again. As Raya comes into contact with various lands and their people, others join her quest.

Unfortunately, some of these supporting roles, including an infant thief, a child cook and a muscle-headed warrior, don't have the opportunity to stand out or generate many laughs. And, as with many Disney flicks, the movie introduces an animal pet designed to look cute, serve a simple function, and otherwise have little to no impact on the story.

Another minor issue is Raya herself. Despite living in a world on the brink of destruction, she is

a good-natured lead who never seems bothered by the various trials forced upon her. This results in action scenes that don't feel particularly dangerous or tense. In general, things seem a little too easy for the warrior princess. The movie does eventually try to rectify the problem by adding a character flaw late in the story when Raya is forced to accept and deal with feelings of mistrust and bitterness toward Namaari.

Unfortunately, this element is only introduced during the final act. It would have added more drama and anxiety to the entire film had it been introduced much earlier.

In the end, *Raya and the Last Dragon* could certainly have incorporated more conflict and excitement into its story. Still, the movie's heart is certainly in the right place, it looks gorgeous and most children won't be troubled by these story problems. As such, parents looking for new entertainment for the kids should find the movie to be a diverting and enjoyable animated adventure.

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By Glenn Kay
For the Sun