

'Minions: The Rise of Gru' won't win awards, but it's still a likable film

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: <<<

out of <<<<<<

Running Time:
87 minutes

This animated film from Universal Pictures opens at cinemas on Friday, July 1.

The “Despicable Me” animated film series started up in 2010 and has since become a massive movie franchise. One of the reasons for its success is the Minions, the central character’s group of unexpectedly cute and good-natured little yellow assistants.

These unusual beings spawned their own successful spin-off prequel title in 2015. This week sees the release of *Minions: The Rise of Gru*, which is a sequel to the previously noted film.

Like most follow-ups, the events on display are a little less fresh and unique than they were in previous installments. However, it’s a pleasant animated feature that will deliver enough chuckles to amuse young audience members.

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Truth be told, this effort could have been released under either franchise banner, since it focuses on both the title characters and their boss. A nearly 12-year-old Gru (Steve Carrell) aspires to join the notorious “Vicious 6” group of supervillains led by Wild Knuckles (Alan Arkin).

When Knuckles is usurped from his position by Belle Bottom (Taraji P. Henson), a new opening appears in the organization. Young Gru decides to apply, but his interview quickly goes south.

To prove his worth, the kid steals a powerful and precious stone from the Vicious 6. He soon finds himself being kidnapped by Knuckles and pursued by the rest of the group. Four Minions, including Kevin, Stuart, Bob and Otto (all voiced by Pierre Coffin) set out on a journey to retrieve the stone and rescue their boss.

The story is very simple and slight. Gru learns from his idol and the Minions travel cross country to locate him. What follows are a series of scattershot jokes as the story jumps between a trio of plotlines with the characters gaining new experiences as they reconvene in San Francisco. These bits include a likable scene in which the yellow creatures discover that their unique body shape can help them move around town at a rapid clip.

But some of the humor is very broad and the verbal gags are blunt, at times landing with a bit of a thud. And the screenplay introduces an interesting Biker character (voiced by RZA), who falls by the wayside and is underutilized in the story.

This effort is set in the 1970s and the screenplay does make use of the time period to generate some laughs. There is an entertaining credit sequence paying homage to James Bond movies of the era, as well as plenty of references to music, biker and kung-fu flicks.

This is particularly evident in a comical subplot involving acupuncturist/kung-fu expert Master Chow (Michelle Yeoh), who agrees to train Kevin, Stuart and Bob in order to help them take on large and threatening opponents. Seeing these small, silly creatures learn to practice martial arts and develop some physical strength is fun to witness and results in several laughs.

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The climax also looks sharp as several of the characters square off in San Francisco's Chinatown. Mention is continually made of the important stone and its connection to animals of the Chinese Zodiac. Of course, there is no shock that many of the more dangerous lifeforms ultimately appear, but thankfully the filmmakers also squeeze every bit of comedy out of the elaborate sequence by adding smaller wild creatures into the mix. It results in a new character that might be the cutest addition to the series.

This film is a hit-and-miss endeavor and one which doesn't add a great deal to the story of Gru or his little helpers. Still, the film moves at a rapid pace and does earn a chuckle for every attempt that doesn't hit the mark.

"Minions: The Rise of Gru" isn't going to earn accolades for being the best animated feature of the year, but this reviewer did find it likable. Families simply looking for a good time will generally be entertained by these vibrantly animated characters and their latest shenanigans.

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