

'Queen of Katwe' overcomes formula with likeable characters

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««« out of 4 stars

Running Time: 124 min.

By now, we pretty much know exactly what to expect from a Disney production. And it doesn't matter if it's a fairy tale or a live-action drama. You'll likely get a heartfelt tale of pro-active youngsters striving to better themselves, rising above their social standing and accomplishing the improbable. It's all pretty familiar and nothing that occurs in *Queen of Katwe* will come as much of a surprise. Yet, the cast is so likable and the production so well-mounted that it ends up being fine regardless.

This story is based on the true-life tale of Phiona Mutesi (Madina Nalwanga), a young, girl living in poverty in Katwe, Uganda. Unable to attend school and illiterate, her life takes a turn after joining an outreach chess program for kids run by Robert Katende (David Oyelowo). Mutesi finds herself adept at playing the game, and rises through the ranks with encouragement from her teacher. However, she encounters some discouragement from her mother (Lupita Nyong'o), who would prefer the youngster help make money to feed the family.

Along the way, Phiona begins to develop social and reading skills while overcoming prejudice from snooty officials and wealthy kids partaking in chess tournaments. It's a simple underdog story that despite being a true tale hits all of the dramatic and inspirational beats. It could easily have felt forced and cornball, but the stars elevate the predictable material. Nalwanga is a likable and compelling lead, adeptly expressing the difficulties of dealing with an at times overbearing mom and intense competition.

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Additionally, Oyelowo excels as her coach. This guy is unfailingly positive, often using humor to inspire the kids and help them past each hurdle. The actor brings a joyous enthusiasm to the real-life figure, and keeps the viewer smiling through the formulaic bits. There are also some relaxed and funny moments between all of the young chess players, goading and pushing each other through stressful events.

Another help to the feature are the authentic and beautifully shot African locations, including Katwe itself. Director Mira Nair (*Monsoon Wedding*, *Salaam Bombay!*) is just as skillful with the tournament scenes, giving viewers the opportunity to follow along and not get too lost in the strategy. Perhaps the nicest touch comes during the closing credits, when the actors are paired with their real life counterparts. It adds an element of authentic warmth to the finale.

While it is inspiring, I could have done with a few less chess analogies. There are several repetitive speeches from Mr. Katende. Phiona and the other students are told that by making a plan, they will always find a safe space... and that when they are knocked down, they must reset their pieces and try again. It's all good advice, but not every concern in the movie needs to be explained through a chess metaphor.

And as this is a Disney movie, the picture avoids any detailed political examination addressing the slums in Katwe. Instead, it focuses on its lead character working hard and rising above terrible conditions.

There are very few surprises over the course of the movie, but one can't argue the fact that it is charming nonetheless. Sometimes, a simple story can make an impact with the right cast and behind-the-scenes talent. *Queen of Katwe* does just that and will impress viewers looking for inspiring family fare.

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