

‘A Monster Calls’ has great visuals, but won’t eke out many tears

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

Running Time: 108 min.

Very recently, I saw a film that really got me watery-eyed, despite all my efforts to resist its effects. This week, another tear-jerker arrives in the form of *A Monster Calls*. It's a beautifully made film with superb visual effects and is a noble attempt to examine the complicated emotions one can feel when a family member becomes ill. Yet for one reason or another, it just didn't affect me the same way.

Conor (Lewis MacDougall) is a teen living with his terminally ill and divorced mother (Felicity Jones). He's struggling at school and is bullied by the kids around him. Events take a turn for the worse with the arrival of his stiff grandmother (Sigourney Weaver) who wants to make arrangements for the family's future. Unexpectedly and like the *Ghost of Christmas Past*, Present and Future, a large tree comes to life (voiced by Liam Neeson) and reports that he will relay three tales to the boy, who will in turn share one of his own later.

The tree and the stories he tells are beautiful to witness. With glowing red eyes, its root-tendrils wrap themselves around rooms and buildings. It's impressive looking as are the visuals of the ground falling away around the kid in his nightmares. The fantastic tales of knights, dragons and various other characters are depicted using watercolor animations and they look equally stylish and impressive. Visually, it is a great-looking movie.

Additionally, the themes are interesting. These aren't simple tales of good and evil, rather reinforce the idea that people and their emotions are far more complicated and nuanced. In

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essence, the tree is helping the boy cope with his fears, frustrations, guilt and fury as his parent becomes sicker and sicker. And so Conor uses the fantastic creation to voice his own personal issues at the situation he finds himself in.

While it looks incredible, the film just didn’t impact me on an emotional level. Conor works through his problems by lashing out. While it is understandable in some respects, it isn’t the most appealing behavior for a lead even if we do learn why he’s doing this at a later point in the story. Weaver, sporting an English accent, seems a bit miscast as the grandmother. As such, it’s a little difficult to buy into or become as dramatically invested in their relationship as we should be. The finale involves a dose of the magical; it is too fantastic and ultimately feels like a bit of a stretch for a movie dealing with the realities of loss and grief.

I enjoyed everything that the film was trying to do and appreciated it to some degree, but never became invested enough in the characters for it to resonate as strongly as it should. In many respects, it reminded me of *Where the Wild Things Are*, a motion picture that I admired watching more than I actually enjoyed. Yes, there’s a lot to like in

A Monster Calls

and it’s a decent film overall. However, the elements that come across as artificial prevented this reviewer from truly investing in the characters or their plight.

**By Glenn Kay
For the Sun**