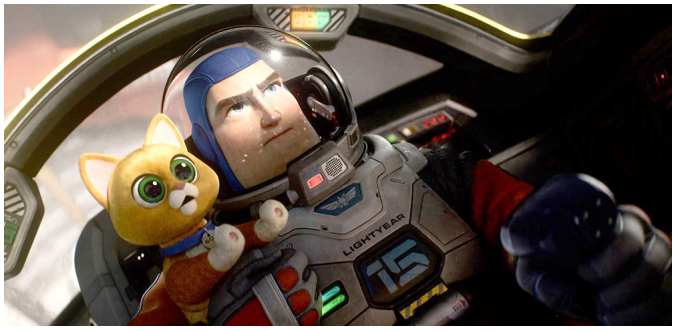

Rating: «««

out of ««««

Running Time: 104 minutes

This animated feature from Disney and Pixar opens at theaters on Friday, June 17.

Those familiar with Pixar films will know that the 1995 hit “Toy Story” was the animation studio’s first full-length feature. It involved a young boy named Andy, whose toys came to life whenever he wasn’t in his room. Over the years, several well-received sequels have followed. While the studio’s new effort “Lightyear” does have a direct connection to the franchise, it is quite different from a traditional follow-up. A title card at the beginning of the movie explains that this is the movie that young Andy saw and loved, making his Buzz Lightyear action figure a personal favorite in the household.

This film introduces viewers to bold and brash pilot Buzz Lightyear (Chris Evans), who has been entrusted alongside his commanding officer Alisha Hawthorne (Uzo Aduba) to get a ship full of travelers across the universe. When they find themselves marooned on a hostile world 4.2 million light years from Earth, the guilt-ridden lead vows to do everything possible to get their ship working again. He learns that the space hyperdrive test flights required have a major drawback, but the stoic hero continues until he succeeds.

Alas, in his absence it is revealed that a sinister figure named Zurg (James Brolin) has invaded the planet with an army of robots. In order to save the day, Lightyear must enlist the help of a young cadet named Izzy (Keke Palmer), his own robotic therapy cat SOX (Peter Sohn) and a few other outcasts.

As mentioned, there is no direct connection between this title and the “Toy Story” movies, except that the main character has a few mannerisms and lines shared with the action figure. This may upset fans of the series hoping for more toy-related shenanigans, but the concept actually allows the filmmakers the opportunity to tell a different kind of adventure.

In truth, this is a fairly straight-forward science fiction picture that takes a more serious approach to its story. There are laughs to be had, but the focus is on a pilot dealing with an impossible situation, and trying to be a hero but missing out on friends and a full personal life in the process. The complications of taking part in these test flights do provide interesting drama and a bit of introspection as his relationship with Alisha changes.

Much of the comedic relief comes in the form of SOX. The character is a robotic cat with AI and it really makes an impression. Naturally, it’s amusing to see a cute animal with enormous eyes deliver data and personal advice with an analytical mind very much in contrast with its appearance.

And more effective jokes come when SOX estimates Lightyear’s odds of success and his own existence is put into danger. Gags involving the leads and Izzy’s pals are more of the hit-and-miss variety, but thankfully SOX is always around to eke some humor out of the situations.

The movie also looks gorgeous, with some wonderful visuals on the strange planet featured, including an unusual plant-like species that is a great nuisance to the leads. There are also some epic shots of the protagonist flying through space. And the invading robots are appropriately intimidating (although not so scary as to terrify young viewers).

It seems that CGI-animation continues to advance further and further every year, with this title

being no exception. Some of the footage on display looks as convincing and dynamic as any live-action sci-fi feature.

Admittedly, there are a few minor issues with the movie. While the central theme and heart of the story is engaging, the reveal of the villain, the exposition and action that follows feels a bit more routine. And since the movie is weightier in tone and its humor relies more on interactions and comments between lead characters, kids might not be as enamored with this movie as they would be with the series that inspired it.

Still, for this reviewer, a movie that appears completely unconnected and tonally dissimilar from the franchise that inspired it is a breath of fresh air. “Lightyear” doesn’t reach the top of the Pixar stratosphere, but it’s a heartfelt and enjoyable movie that should impress science-fiction enthusiasts.

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For the Sun