

'Pinocchio' looks polished, but feels wooden

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

out of <<<<<<

Running Time: 105 minutes

This Disney+ Day premiere will launch on September 8th exclusively on Disney+.

While Disney have been producing live-action adaptations of their own animated properties for decades now, in recent times there have been so many that it is hard to keep up with them all. Over the last three years, we've seen new editions of "Dumbo," "Aladdin," "The Lion King" and "Mulan," not to mention the "Maleficent" spin-offs from "Cinderella," as well as "Cruella" from 101 Dalmatians and more. The latest live-action redo is "Pinocchio," which in itself was an adaptation of the beloved 1883 novel "The Adventures of Pinocchio" by Carlo Collodi. Disney's 1940 take on the book is still considered by many as one of their crowning cinematic achievements and one of the most memorable animated features in their entire catalog.

The story is told by a friendly grasshopper named Jiminy Cricket (Joseph Gordon-Levitt provides the voice). The insect arrives at the home of a lonely woodworker named Geppetto (Tom Hanks), who has just finished creating an impressive marionette named Pinocchio (voiced

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by Benjamin Evan Ainsworth). After wishing upon a star that his creation was real, The Blue Fairy (Cynthia Erivo) appears and brings Pinocchio to life.

The title character is thrilled to have Geppetto for a father, but still yearns to be an actual boy. He is told by the fairy that being brave, truthful and unselfish may do the trick. Jiminy Cricket offers to be Pinocchio's temporary conscience and help him attain his goal. However, the lead soon comes into contact with shady characters like Honest John (Keegan-Michael Key), Stromboli (Giuseppe Battiston), and The Coachman (Luke Evans), all of whom attempt to con the naïve wooden puppet.

Revising this famous tale is truly a daunting task.

And despite the star power of Hanks and technical skills of director Robert Zemeckis ("Back to the Future," "Who Framed Roger Rabbit," "Forrest Gump," "Cast Away," "The Polar Express") behind the camera, the opening act is remarkably clumsy and awkward. In fact, the first half-hour is set within one room, forcing Hanks to sing and interact alone with Pinocchio and other CGI-characters.

The marionette looks convincing, but others (like pet cat Figaro) do not and have a distracting effect. Early attempts at humor fall flat as well, including a labored series of jokes which involve some of Geppetto's woodwork resembling Disney icons. Hanks does his best and lands a line or two.

Still, it feels forced, with the actor seemingly encouraged to behave in an exaggerated manner like the original animated character. It all comes across as artificial when delivered by a live performer.

Things improve slightly as Pinocchio leaves home, becomes separated from Geppetto and is forced to fend for himself. Zemeckis does attempt to tweak the story a little and a few touches are effective.

This reviewer did appreciate that Pinocchio is forced to learn and figure out important lessons

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on his own, instead of being rescued by the Blue Fairy and having things explained to him.

But while this change is fine, other alterations don't work quite as smoothly. There is a nice attempt to add a female character to the story in the form of Fabiana (Kyanne Lamaya). Unfortunately, she needs to be given more to do. The character isn't given much of a purpose other than to sing a song and relay unnecessary exposition to Pinocchio.

Only when Pinocchio encounters The Coachman and befriends Lampwick (Lewin Lloyd) does the film jolt to life. This film's depiction of Pleasure Island is a visual treat and, amusingly enough, the locale looks like a Disney ride gone horribly awry. While some of the vices from the original story have been softened, it's still entertaining to watch. The humor and sinister elements featured in this section are compelling and far more exciting than earlier sections of the feature.

In summation, the visual effects bringing Pinocchio to life are impressive, the Pleasure Island section works and there are a few enjoyable recreations of the original's famous tunes (alongside some competent but otherwise forgettable new additions). But sadly, in this adaptation the heart of the story with Geppetto doesn't resonate at all. Instead, the film leaves audiences with some stiff interactions between characters and, most importantly, a weak and less-than-stirring climax and finale. This version of "Pinocchio" looks bright and polished, but feels stilted and wooden.

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