

‘The Woman King’ works because of a charismatic cast, impressive battle scenes

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

out of «««««

Running Time: 135 minutes

This feature film from TriStar Pictures will premiere exclusively in movie theaters Sept. 16.

Loosely based on the history of the Dahomey Kingdom in West Africa during the early 19th century, the new feature “The Woman King” presents some new narrative elements to audiences. Specifically, it details members of the Agojie, an all-female team of vigilant warriors who served to protect their kingdom and leaders. The feature suffers slightly from a jumbly story that juggles back and forth between two central characters, but ultimately works thanks to a charismatic cast and some impressive battle scenes.

General Nanisca (Viola Davis) is the fearsome and vigilant leader of the Agojie, who serve the

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Dahomey nation. Her primary role involves leading fighters into battle against the neighboring Oyo Empire, who are taking Dahomey prisoners and selling them to slave traders from Europe and the Americas. Despite advisors pleading that King Ghezo (John Boyega) reach a diplomatic compromise with their enemy, Nanisca’s unwavering commitment to fight causes tension between herself and other high-ranking officials.

In the meantime, 19-year-old Dahomey villager Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) refuses to participate in an arranged marriage and is forced by her father to leave home and join the Agojie. The clever but inexperienced youngster is trained by Izogie (Lashana Lynch), quickly making an impression on Nanisca. As conflicts with the Oyo worsen, Nawi is forced to join in the war.

While the opening scenes focus on Nanisca and set up the conflict between the Dahomey and Oyo kingdoms, this story element is quickly put on the backburner. Instead, early sections of the film focus primarily on Nawi and her struggles and experiences training to be an Agojie. This actually turns out to be a positive, as Nawi’s journey and her relationship with trainer Izogie is the highlight of the film. Despite being drilled to be ruthless killers without a shred of emotion, the two characters ultimately open up to each other.

In particular, Izogie gives humorous advice and adds a dose of levity during the brutal process. The pair are captivating throughout and one actually ends up wishing that their relationship and story was the center of the entire film.

In the second half, the focus shifts back to the conflict itself, the political maneuvering and Nanisca. This material is delivered in a far blunter and more predictable manner.

Naturally, Davis is powerful and compelling as the warrior general, but her personal journey ends up being an overly familiar one. A tormenting secret from her past is revealed, causing consternation and potentially changing a relationship. Surprisingly, the screenplay chooses to answer this burning question almost immediately after raising it. It’s a strange tactic, given that the movie could have cultivated the subplot for far more suspense and drama had it waited to address it until the finale (or had just left it open to debate).

But, while some of the melodrama is delivered in an overly straightforward manner, the action certainly delivers and makes up for some of these issues. There are plenty of striking fight

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sequences and an elaborately staged battle as the intimidating characters get into conflict with the Oyo. Even young members of the team with slight builds get to show off and take down threats with dizzying spins and fast, powerful strikes.

Admittedly, the screenplay has some story issues and the movie delivers its message with a lack of subtlety. Additionally, history buffs will also take plenty of issue with the actual history of this region and what really transpired during this period. Still, “The Woman King” boasts some magnetic performances, as well as plenty of well-staged action scenes that will ultimately fascinate and entertain viewers.

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