

'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem' is a mixed bag of tricks

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

out of <<<<<<

Running Time:
99 minutes

This animated feature from Paramount Pictures opens exclusively at theaters on Friday, Aug. 2.

Since the late 1980s, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles have been a staple of kid's television programming and the silver screen. So much so that even this reviewer may be overly familiar with the characters and their backstory (even going back to their comic book roots). *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem* is the seventh movie featuring the heroes and serves as a reboot potentially introducing a new series of films to the public. The visuals are unique, but the fact that it serves primarily as an origin story means that there isn't as much, well, ninja turtle action as one might hope for.

A prologue depicts rogue scientist Baxter Stockman (Giancarlo Esposito) creating an oozy substance that mutates animals and gives them human qualities. While those employing him hope to use the substance for military purposes, its creator has other ideas. Years later, ninja

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turtle brothers Michelangelo (Shamon Brown Jr.), Leonardo (Nicholas Cantu), Donatello (Micah Abbey) and Raphael (Brady Noon) live with rat and adoptive parent Splinter (Jackie Chan) in the New York sewers.

Despite Splinter's insistence that humans are dangerous, the lonely kids want a more normal existence. After learning of a group of mutant criminals committing robberies, the quartet enact a secret plan with high school reporter April O'Neil (Ayo Edebiri). The teens decide that if they can get press coverage of themselves stopping the crooks, the public might warm up to them. But as it turns out, the nefarious mutants have relatable issues with humanity, leaving the turtles conflicted about what they want.

The most striking aspect of this animated film is its visual style. To some degree it seems as if the filmmakers were inspired by the look of the original comic books.

Yes, the film is in color, but it employs a rougher appearance with characters and backgrounds that have a sketched-in look. The technique is a bit jarring at first and occasionally distracts, but eventually one becomes accustomed to it. And this eccentric presentation does add an air of uniqueness to many of the shots (particularly a late sequence featuring a sizably monstrous character with surreal physical traits).

As expected, there is also amusing bickering between the heroic turtles, who often tease each other in enjoyably playful ways. Jackie Chan's Splinter also gets in some winning lines (and is on the receiving end of a few comebacks) when the character continually suggests a bizarre and seemingly nonsensical way in which the turtles could be harmed.

In fact, there's an amazing assortment of voice talent present, including the likes of Ice Cube, Rose Byrne, Seth Rogen, Paul Rudd, Natasia Demetriou, John Cena and Hannibal Buress, to name but a few. Rudd stands out in particular as Mondo Gecko, the dizziest member of the criminal band.

Yet, in spite of some impressive visuals and some yuks, there are plenty of sticking points. Almost all of the characters, including the turtles, the mutant gang and April O'Neil are social outcasts who have trouble fitting in. It's fine to tie some similar issues between characters together, but hearing every figure complain about how different they feel ultimately becomes

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repetitive.

My biggest gripe comes as a result of this movie being an extended origin story. What took less than one minute in the animated series and other movies is overly padded out here. Anyone hoping to see these ninja turtles use, well, their ninja turtle skills in battle, will ultimately be disappointed.

When the heroes decide to become crime fighters, viewers see a brief montage of them taking out foes. But they essentially become spectators when they meet the mutant posse and only become active during the finale. It's difficult not to feel a little frustrated that the screenplay doesn't derive excitement and laughs from the characters attempting to use their learned martial arts skills for the first time on the streets.

The film has its moments and benefits from unique visuals and a talented and funny voice cast. But the main story isn't as compelling, nor does it take full advantage of delivering on its heroes' unique skill set. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem* ends up being something of a mixed bag of tricks.

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