

'Kubo and the Two Strings' has fantastic visuals (but could use a stronger finish)

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 19 August 2016 03:34



Rating: «««« out of 4 stars

Running Time: 101 min.

August used to be a time for studios to release summer misfires, but so far this month, we've gotten some effective little films. Okay, it's had its share of flops, too, but for such a muggy time, there have been a couple of breaths of fresh air — *Hell or High Water* and even *Sausage Party* being examples.

Kubo and the Two Strings is another rarity in that it isn't a reboot or sequel, but rather a unique attempt to pay homage to Asian cinema. It results in a very pretty picture, though one that isn't without a few issues. Still, in the end there's enough style on display to earn it a minor recommendation.

Kubo (Art Parkinson) lives near a small village with his mother, a woman suffering from memory loss after a head injury years earlier. Not only does she give vague accounts of what happened to Kubo's father, she insists that the boy come home each day before the sun sets.

Naturally, the protagonist misses his curfew and is visited by various family members (voiced by Rooney Mara and Ralph Fiennes) out to capture the boy and take his one working eye. He escapes and is sent on a magical quest to retrieve items that will assist him in vanquishing the bad guys. Helping the boy realize his potential is his protector, Monkey (Charlize Theron), and the amnesiac insect samurai, Beetle (Matthew McConaughey).

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As you can already tell, memory is a big theme here.

It takes a bit of time to get going, but once Kubo begins his journey and is joined by Monkey, the film hits its stride. When Beetle arrives, it goes into overdrive. They make a great trio, with Monkey earning plenty of laughs as the annoyed and often unimpressed parental figure to Kubo. She and Beetle often butt heads as well. There's a great deal of good-natured bickering between the pair. As expected, the voice-work is excellent and the three leads are distinct and enjoyable to listen to.

Another plus is the gorgeous imagery and phenomenal stop-motion animation. A sequence featuring the heroes facing off against a gigantic, deadly skeleton is a visually spectacular treat. Another, in which the lead swims to the bottom of the sea and comes face to face with underwater plants housing large and colorful eyeballs is a surreal delight.

From beginning to end the movie is a marvel to look at.

It's funny that after such a great second act, the only element that feels underwhelming is the climax and finale.

When Kubo meets the main antagonist, it's a rather muted affair in comparison with earlier events. I certainly understand the intent; the themes of memory and forgiveness are admirable, but they're overplayed at the close and come across in a muddled fashion.

Even in a fantasy world, after all is revealed, this reviewer found elements murky and had some trouble understanding the motives of specific characters. Truthfully, the last act could have been reworked in a more dramatic and compelling manner.

And finally, a word of warning for parents with small children. Like other films from this production company (*Coraline*, *Para-Norman*) there is some frightening imagery and (SPOILER ALERT!) several characters, well, expire over the course of the story. If you don't want your

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child to have to process some potentially heavy issues like mortality, you might want to hold off until you feel they’re ready.

Overall, *Kubo and the Two Strings* is an impressive-looking feature that offers something very different from typical kids’ fare. If only it had struck the landing, I would be raving about it. Even with a lackluster and strangely flat finale, it has some merits; older children and fans of animated cinema will at least enjoy what they see.

***By Glenn Kay
For the Sun***