

‘Moana’ looks incredible, but isn’t very memorable

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «« out of 4 stars

Running Time: 113 min.

The latest animated tale from Disney is a Polynesian-inspired adventure that lends itself to gorgeous landscapes and impressive vistas. *Moana* is a film chock full of incredible imagery and animation: Lush tropical gardens, striking seascapes and eye-popping animals and Deities. And without a doubt, kids will definitely enjoy what they see. It’s too bad that the rest of it, including the characters, don’t make as much of an impact.

Moana (Auli’i Cravalho) lives on an island paradise, the daughter of Chief Tui (Tamara Morrison) and next in line to inherit the throne. However, she desires a different life. It involves breaking from family tradition, leaving the island and exploring the ocean waves. Moana gets her chance when she discovers a jewel that has cursed her home. The youngster steals a catamaran and sets out to find the demigod Maui (Dwayne Johnson) to help her return the gem to its original resting place.

As mentioned, the highlight of this feature are the beautifully rendered visuals. The sea shots are gorgeous and there’s a bright musical number involving an enormous sea crab (voiced by Jemaine Clement) that really pops off the screen. Later, the climax involving a creature spewed from the lava of a volcano looks equally astounding. There’s also a group of evil coconuts on a strange barge who attack Moana and Maui, leading to a massive chase. It’s a spectacular sequence, filled with images of boats crashing as well as characters running through unique-looking vessels (even if it does feel extraneous, wedged in as an action scene tangent that simply has been thrown in to add some excitement).

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Yet, the story is rather dull overall and the adventure isn't as exciting as it should be. Part of the issue has to do with the fact that Moana sails off alone and doesn't have any humans to play off of early on. Additionally, the sea water literally takes a liking to the girl, forming around Moana and helping her when she's in trouble. The simple fact that even the ocean wants to assist her in a perilous journey drowns much of the suspense.

When Maui is introduced, things improve dramatically and there's some good-natured dialogue highlighting their personality conflicts. However, their issues aren't anything unique or memorable. The youngster wants to make her own way in the world and the boasting demigod simply wants love and attention from humankind. It may be well-handled, but this is pretty by-the-numbers stuff.

And to nitpick a little more, it all seems confused about what it's trying to say. This is a story about a girl finding independence free from the constraints and obligations forced upon her. Yet, as she learns about her history, we discover that she's simply following the exact same footsteps of her ancestors. The intent of message is nice, but by the time she begins to sing about the noble lineage of her family, it all feels a bit weird. Why does the lead character even need to be the daughter of a Chief?

As expected, Disney movies are typically populated with cute animal kingdom friends. In this case, there's a cute pig and an idiotic rooster. It may seem strange to criticize a movie for not paying more attention to its critters, but they should have some sort of a character arc. The rooster walks into posts and falls repeatedly. It's amusing for a while, but that's all the bird does for two hours. And the pig adds nothing to the story; its sole reason to exist is to smile at Moana and look sweet.

Overall, *Moana* isn't a bad film. It is admittedly gorgeous to look at; I enjoyed the environments and chuckled occasionally at events. This title will certainly please children, but the story feels bland in comparison to the tropical imagery on display. In the end its visuals impress, but isn't otherwise very memorable.

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