

Spectacle, Emotion Propel Animation in ‘Mars Needs Moms’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on March 11, 2011 - 6:07pm

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – “Mars Needs Moms” is an animated epic that takes its time to build toward the message, but the path to that real emotion is decorated with spectacular imagery and sprightly comedy. It’s Mom, apple pie and motion capture technology.

Going the same route as “Avatar,” but creating a more cartoon feel, Mars Needs Moms uses motion capture – the actors performing in specially designed outfits on which their animated characters will be applied to in post production – as a way to create a Planet Mars that needs a lesson. The landscape of this lesson is breathtaking, another breakthrough in design and function. The story gets in the way a bit, but evens the score with a exciting ending.

Milo (crisply voiced by Seth Green) is a pre-pubescent boy who hates taking out the garbage and feels he is put upon by his demanding mother (Joan Cusack). After another argument, he is forced to his room, and hurls a very hurtful last epithet towards his Mom. Meanwhile, in the underground world of the Planet Mars, Milo’s mother has been targeted as a perfect disciplinarian figure to abduct for nefarious purposes.

And abducted she is. A posse of Martians captures her in the night, but not without notice from Milo, who pursuits the captors back to the spacecraft. He manages to get aboard, and through the wormhole the rocket occupants go, back to the Red Planet. Milo is noticed and imprisoned, but an unseen force opens his cell, and craftily leads him to a large garbage dump. There he meets Gribble, an earthling who ended up on Mars 25 years ago for the same reason Milo is there; they captured his mother.



Nerve Center: Gribble (Voice of Dan Folger) and Milo (Seth Green) in ‘Mars Need Moms’
Photo credit: © Image Movers Digital

Gribble explains that Mars implants the perfect mother's disciplinary essence into their robot nannies, who then care for the children who are born every 25 years. The mother they use is expendable, she ceases to exist once the power of the sunrise completes the process. That gives Milo about six hours to plan a rescue. With Gribble's help, and a hippie-esque Martian named Ki (Elisabeth Harnois), they might just be able to pull it off.

This is a beautifully drawn film, borrowing from 1950s sci-fi, "1984" style totalitarianism, Martian design straight out of Fritz Lang's "Metropolis" and the intense topography of Mars. It looks fantastic and really works well in 3D, but the story is good enough to see it in any dimension and that is how good animation ultimately works. The production (co-written and directed by Simon Wells) creates a broad and spectacular scope, which serves as a fantastical backdrop to what is essentially an ode to motherhood.

The acting is critical to making the story work, and everyone pitches in wonderfully. Like Avatar, they get to interact as their characters, and a new skin is applied to these performances. This allows emotional territory like close-ups to express feelings in a way that other animation can't achieve. The bubbly hippie nature of Ki, for example, is brightly present in the simple exercise of her character standing in scene, like a live-action movie. Seth Green also captures the child on the cusp of adolescence in a very heroic form. Dan Folger improves along the way, taking a "Jack Black" characterization to another realm by the end.

Even the stranger elements of the Martian social structure are intriguing. The ruling society is populated and run by women, led by an elderly "supervisor," who demands order and discipline. The male children are left to roam wild in the garbage dump, but somehow create a somewhat Rastafarian order. Politically, socially and morally this can be master debated for days, it's just another piece of this unusual narrative that is worth noting. Also the Martian women are designed with birthing hips...maybe I need to see a therapist about that.

If there is any flaw in the ointment tale, it involves the "explanations" about the Martian concepts, mostly provided by the dialogue gymnastics of Gribble. He is portrayed as a fanboy nerd, so his gleeful yet too-fast lessons on the culture of Mars does have a basis in belief. It's a intricate story, one that doesn't emerge organically, but again, by the conclusion there is a nice wrapping of everything together.



Ki to it All: Elisabeth Harnois is the Voice of the Rebel Ki in 'Mars Need Moms'
Photo credit: © Image Movers Digital

This new golden age of animation continues to inject a sense of wonder into these marvelous stories. Mars is available to us as a character, it's horizon and underground world just as awe-inspiring as the notion in our realization. Creative minds and technology are merging to fashion a never-imagined sense of reality.

And it's all in tribute to dear old Mom. M is for the many ways she is motion captured. O is for the other, more acutely emotional way...for gosh sakes, give your mother a call, if you are lucky enough to be able to.

"Mars Needs Mothers" opens everywhere March 11th. Featuring the voices of Seth Green, Dan Fogler, Joan Cusack, Elisabeth Harnois and Tom Everett Scott.. Based on the book by Berkeley Breathed, screenplay by Simon Wells and Wendy Wells, directed by Simon Wells. Rated "PG" NOTE: Stay for the end credits, they contain a fun music video and some behind-the-animation technology scenes.



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