

‘Real Steel’ Overcomes Harebrained Premise With Heart, Quenching Hollywood Wizardry

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Try selling a friend on paying to see a movie with you about machine-operated boxing where humans control robots for money.

Just call your friend on his Motorola DynaTAC retro brickphone and say: “Hey, Billy! Remember all those swell nights we had as kids when I smoked you every time in Rock’em Sock’em Robots with our two dueling robot boxers mechanically manipulated by us? There’s a new movie out that pays homage to all those times you wasted trying to decapitate my robot’s head.” From that vapid premise alone, you’d likely have better luck snagging a date to a film about [vaginal dentata](#) [20].



Hugh Jackman in “Real Steel”.

Image credit: DreamWorks

But fret not, friend: there’s hope yet for Disney’s sci-fi sports movie “Real Steel,” which is a sovereign testament to the power of the absurd. What if instead you were pitched to see a high-tech “Rocky” starring Hugh Jackman (Wolverine in the “X-Men” movies) from executive producer Steven Spielberg and producer Robert Zemeckis (the “Back to the Future” movies) with original music by Danny Elfman? Now’s your interest piqued?

It should be, because big Hollywood names aside, this Michigan-filmed family movie overcomes an initially harebrained-sounding story line with just enough thrill, modern-day ocular wizardry and even fragments of heart-warming emotion to convert most initial skeptics into believers.



Evangeline Lilly (left) and Dakota Goyo in “Real Steel”.

Image credit: Melissa Moseley, DreamWorks

You’re able to forgive the by-the-books plot progression of this David the underdog vs. Goliath the champion story because brain beating out brawn feels vindicating and real. And even if none of that resonates with you, at least every lover of Nintendo Wii boxing will dig living vicariously through this film’s 12-year-old star.

“Real Steel” from director Shawn Levy (the “Night at the Museum” films) – who used his influence to cast his kids Sophie Levy, Tess Levy and Charlie Levy – is equal parts original and cliché. While we haven’t seen human-controlled robot boxers quite like this before, a thousand times over we’ve had a little boy with daddy abandonment issues and a papa who tries to make up for a lifetime of lost time. And in classic Disney fashion, the underlying theme of trying to profit from championship boxing robots really discusses the central tenants of love, family and second chances.

While you’d expect high-tech eye candy from a movie like this, you might be surprised to see its raw emotion and be affected by it yourself. In “Real Steel,” Shawn Levy used music to elicit real emotion from his actors. He said: “I play music on set when I’m shooting. The more intellectual the actor, the more I find music is a great way to direct because you bypass the cerebral intellect with music. For every sequence of the movie, I make a playlist months before I make the movie.”



“Real Steel”.

Image credit: DreamWorks

While you know lead Hugh Jackman and your eyes won’t mind his love interest Evangeline Lilly (TV’s “Lost”), the lead kid character Max was the film’s most critical casting decision. In Feb. 2010, [DreamWorks Studios went public](#) [21] with its search for Max. They called for a street-smart, tough, charming kid aged 10 to 14 years old with a hard, untrusting outer shell. Max hides a warm and enthusiastic spirit beneath and he’s a complicated, resourceful and strong-willed boy.

And 12-year-old Dakota Goyo (“Thor,” “Resurrecting the Champ”) truly does embody all of the demands the studio had for Max. To draw out of him natural crying during a scene in the film, for example, Levy played for Goyo “First Breath After Coma” by Explosions in the Sky. Levy said to Goyo: “I need you to cry. I’m gonna play some music. Feel what you feel. We’re gonna roll slow motion. Let’s see what happens.’ First it was the nostril, then the chin and that one frickin’ tear.”



Anthony Mackie (middle left) Hugh Jackman (middle right) in “Real Steel”.

Image credit: Melissa Moseley, DreamWorks

Evangeline Lilly well-played her part as the complicated maternal gearhead girlfriend. Hugh Jackman sailed by as the wreckless, initially heartless, American profiteer who emotionally evolved much later in life to a place he should have found decades before. Interestingly, the kid is much more emotionally intelligent all along than his dad who left him behind long ago.

The film’s final fight transports boxing lovers specifically to “Rocky IV” where a street-smart, smaller and scrapier Rocky Balboa wages war against the seemingly unbeatable Russian powerhouse Ivan Drago. Much the same with “Real Steel,” the kid resurrects from a scrapyard an obsolete robot fighter and former professional boxer Charlie Kenton (Hugh Jackman) actually trains it using old-world boxing techniques.

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The antediluvian Atom robot then takes on the supposedly omnipotent Zeus for the title. In an enjoyable twist, the good guys resort to human-controlled shadow boxing to find an edge over their god-like adversary. While not a TKO and certainly not devoid of hackneyed dialogue or predictable plot twists, “Real Steel” wins the vote in a split decision as the people’s champion.

“Real Steel” stars Hugh Jackman, Evangeline Lilly, Dakota Goyo, Anthony Mackie, Kevin Durand, Hope Davis, James Rebhorn, Marco Ruggeri, Karl Yune, Olga Fonda, John Gatins, Gregory Sims, Sophie Levy, Tess Levy and Charlie Levy from director Shawn Levy, writers John Gatins and Dan Gilroy, executive producer Steven Spielberg, producer Robert Zemeckis and composer Danny Elfman. “Real Steel,” which has a running time of 127 minutes and opened on Oct. 7, 2011, is rated “PG-13” for some violence, intense action and brief language.



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