

Aardman Studios Offers a Merry ‘Arthur Christmas’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on November 23, 2011 - 4:49pm

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Aardman Studios, the creators of the irrepressible “Wallace & Gromit” and the witty “Flushed Away” is back with another animated holiday treat, “Arthur Christmas.” Santa Claus and the gang are taken into the modern era, but the cheeky lads/lasses at Aardman can’t help but throw in a bit of whimsy and heart.

This is a British film, with a British point-of-view. Santa Claus is also Father Christmas, and he is given a back story and a family that adds to the legend. There is a British tactile efficiency to the North Pole set-up, which begins with a child’s letter to Santa, asking the questions like, “how do you deliver all those toys in just one night?” Despite the stiff upper lip, the Aardman Studios know where the heart is, and delivers glorious holiday spirit in a winningly fun story.

“Arthur Christmas” (voice of James McAvoy) is actually Santa’s son. His hapless manner gets him bounced around Santa Claus, Inc., until he is reduced to answering the children’s letters to the big guy (Jim Broadbent). The brains behind the toy delivery operation is Arthur’s older brother Steve (Hugh Laurie), and what an operation it is. The elves are utilized almost as mercenary soldiers, shimmying down ropes from a giant starship, “S-1.” The real and aging Santa (there is a lineage) is merely a figurehead on the journey. It is assumed that Steve will take the reins for the next Yule.



In the Teeth of the Holiday: Arthur (voice of James McAvoy) and Grandsanta (Bill Nighy) in ‘Arthur Christmas’

Photo credit: Aardman Animations for Sony Pictures Animation

Complications arise in the wee hours of Christmas Day, when only one of the billions of toys delivered doesn't make it to its little girl recipient. This seems okay to the statistically oriented Steve, but not to the sentimentally imbued Arthur. He enlists the Grandsanta (Bill Nighy, the Santa before the current one) and kicks it old school with a sleigh, flying reindeer and Bryony (Ashley Jensen), an elf expert in wrapping presents. This of course puts a wrench into the efficiencies, and the Santa operation must find a way to adapt.

Despite a weak start, with the story dragging a bit in its need to re-educate on the new twists in the Santa legend, "Arthur Christmas" has a great time with the adventures of the sleigh hijacking crew. Arthur is a bit too dorky, but all real heroes are, because they favor what is right in the moment rather than the big picture. Santa's modern operations are the most coldly British, very computer oriented (right down to an India-style call center elf) and doesn't send the message I think the animators were trying to convey.

It is in the second half of the film, when the adventure is underway, that the story wakes up. Bryony the Wrapping Elf (ha-ha) is dryly humorous, and Bill Nighy as Grandsanta is in his over-the-top mode. The scenery is precious, especially a stop in an animal preserve in Africa, and a mix-up between a town in England and one in Mexico. Here Arthur's dorkiness plays better, and it is when all is bitterly lost that his spirit of Christmas comes through.

The filmmakers strive for some 3D magic, and mostly succeed. It does get a bit distracting, especially with a wonderful story like this, when cheap 3D gags become noticeable, but how else are they going to convince us that it's worth an extra fee? The coolest settings were the icy hallways of the underground Santa lair, the interior ship of the S-1 (for Santa, of course), and a marvelous sequence in which Bryony wraps a bicycle in midair, reminiscent of a signature Aardman Studios moment in "Wallace & Gromit's A Close Shave."



Wrap Master: Bryony (Ashley Jensen) Gets it Done in 'Arthur Christmas'
Photo credit: Aardman Animations for Sony Pictures Animation

As a Christmas story, it does have a sense of bearing. After all the histrionics of the futuristic toy delivery, it is the look on a child's face that really is the magic. The heart of this simple feeling overwhelms all the computer screens, star ships and exotic locales. It is why Christmas is embraced in a culture that needs embracing itself. We live and love for those very moments.

So a Merry "Arthur Christmas" to you, only two days before the actual season begins. In the long lineage of Santa Clauses depicted in this film, it is Arthur who is obviously the heritage, simply because he remembers the true meaning of it all.

"Arthur Christmas" opens everywhere on November 23rd. Featuring the voices of James McAvoy, Hugh Laurie, Jim Broadbent, Imelda Staunton, Laura Linney, Michael Palin, Joan Cusack, Ashley Jensen and Bill Nighy. Screenplay by Peter Baynham and Sarah Smith, directed by Sarah Smith. Rated "PG"



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