

Emotionally Animated 'My Life as a Zucchini'

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Leave it to the Europeans to inject some realistic drama into the art of animation. The recently Oscar nominated “My Life as a Zucchini” is opening in Chicago this weekend, and tells the story of parental abandonment, orphanages and finding family. Co-produced by France and Switzerland, it uses a familiar claymation stop-motion style for more emotional resonance.

The English dubbed version is cast with familiar names – Nick Offerman, Ellen Page, Will Forte and Amy Sedaris – and that adds even more connection to the material. The film is an adaptation of a novel by Gilles Paris, and pulls no punches in its presentation of a group of orphans, telling the back stories of their circumstances with substance abuse parents, drunken parents, abusive parents and deported parents. The kids are all misfits, and need to rally to each other to get through their challenges. The story suffers a bit through a tipped off ending, but still has value when combining the unique animation with the stark and authentic journeys of the orphans.

A young boy, nicknamed Zucchini (English voiced by Erick Abbate), lives with his mother in a French village. He dreams of his father – who abandoned him long ago – and worries about his mother, who remains in a state of drunken stupor. In that stupor, she dies in an accident (which Zucchini misinterprets as his fault), and the boy is taken to an orphanage by a sympathetic cop named Raymond (Nick Offerman).



Zucchini (front) and the Gang at the Orphanage in 'My Life as a Zucchini'

Photo credit: Gkids

There is a hierarchy in the orphanage, led by tough-guy Simon (Romy Beckman), and is filled with emotionally stunted children, based on their past parental distress. At first, Zucchini is shunned, but after a fight with Simon he becomes accepted into the fold. When a young girl named Camille (Ness Krell) is brought into the group, Zucchini's heart starts to melt, and his cop friend Raymond is also providing some comfort in his difficult life.

This is unusual for an animated story featuring little ones, with its stark realities affecting the children in different ways, pointing out rightly that sometimes the real monsters are the desperate souls who cannot or will not take parental responsibility. The individual situations are somewhat of a bummer, especially in how they affect the psyches of the kids, but it does allow the kind hearted people of the orphanage (voiced by Amy Sedaris, Will Forte and Ellen Page) to rescue them, and bring them back to being kids.

The style of the animation is amusing, counter to the story it offers, and helps in modifying the situations of the kids. Zucchini is an illustrator, and sends Raymond letters with drawings of his life – including his interpretations of sex, which realistically fascinates the kids. The bulbous heads of the claymation stop-motion style are always welcoming, including the rendering of ordinary stuff in the same style...like cars, beer cans and snow.



Zucchini and Raymond in 'My Life as a Zucchini'

Photo credit: Gkids

It is with gratitude that the story does have a happy ending, with the philosophy of working to find the meaning of family, but it is tipped off a mile away and kind of magically arrives to that point, rather than finding a more interesting way to get there. After going through all the sorrowful stories of the kids, and getting a bit of redemption through the staff of the orphanage, it seemed like it should have just kept following through with that drop-by-drop authenticity. There is nothing wrong with showing some light in the darkness, because it can happen, it just didn't feel like it belonged in the same place with the realistic parts of the story.

The new Golden Age of Animation continues, with more voices and expression getting the chance to provide new worlds out from the "clay" of what is possible, by progressing familiar cartoon styles forward. "My Life as a Zucchini" is a prime example of the possibilities of an evolved cinematic form.

"My Life as a Zucchini" opens in Chicago on March 10th, at the Music Box Theatre, 3733 North Southport, Chicago. See local listings for other theaters and show times nationwide. Featuring the voices (English dubbing) of Nick Offerman, Will Forte, Amy Sedaris, Ellen Page, Erick Abbate, Romy Beckman and Ness Krell. Screenplay adapted by Céline Sciamma, from a novel by Gilles Paris. Directed by Claude Barras. Rated "PG-13"



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