

Everything is Beautiful at the Ballet in ‘Leap!’

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – One of the rites of passage for most girls in the U.S.(and elsewhere, I presume) is ballet lessons. Usually it lasts for a very short time, but some girls-to-women keep pursuing it, and may even become prima ballerinas. A new animated film named “Leap!” is dedicated to that spirit.

The headline is a lyric quote from “A Chorus Line” and their magnificent song “At the Ballet,” about the longing and destiny of dance. There is a bit of that in “Leap!,” but mostly it deals with the usual plucky-orphan-sticking-it-to-the-man and becoming a ballerina against all odds. And since it works at a kid’s level, the story is nothing to write home about. But the choreography is the thing in this one, as the animators used the exquisite movements of ballerinas and reproduced them in cartoon characters. For every little girl who has taken the dance stage, or the little girl inside the woman, “Leap!” delivers that particular feeling.

Orphans Félicie (voice of Elle Fanning) and Victor (Nat Wolff) have plans to escape their institute and move to 1880s Paris, not letting being the age of 13 or so stop them. They escape the clutches of groundskeeper Luteau (Mel Brooks) and make it to the City of Lights. While Victor finds work as an office boy for Gustave Eiffel (of the Tower fame), through a series of events Félicie ends up at dance school at the Paris Opera Ballet.



Wings of Destiny: Félicie (voice of Elle Fanning) and Victor (Nat Wolff) in 'Leap!'

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

Those series of events include meeting washerwoman Odette (Carly Rae Jepsen) who used to be a ballerina and now will train her, and having Félicie use a false name of Camille to get into an audition for the Nutcracker. The real Camille (Maddie Ziegler) is spoiled rich girl who Odette works for, pushed by her stage mother Regine (Kate McKinnon). As the audition process heats up, the teacher Mérante (Terrence Scammell) and a the handsome Russian dancer prove distracting for Félicie, who may get caught in her lie.

That's probably more plot than necessary, however it does indicate that this is basic poor-versus-rich stuff, with passion winning out over whatever motivations rich people have (it's funny, that in real life, the wealthy are perceived to be the winners). This is wrapped up in a slapstick type plot, since Victor's dream is to be a builder and inventor... if there is a glimpse of his flying wings in the first act, we know they will show up in the third act.

This is a co-production between France and Canada (originally entitled "Ballerina"), and had some cast changes before opening in the U.S. (Mel Brooks and Kate McKinnon were added), plus Victor's voice was changed from Dane DeHaan ("The Amazing Spider-Man") – a fine actor – to Nat Wolff ("The Fault in Our Stars"). One up-and-comer post pubescent actor to another, how come? The voice work was choppy because of this, but was paired with a decent photo-realistic animation. The smooth faces of the characters are a bit creepy, however, when shown in close up.



Félicie Stands Out From the Crowd in ‘Leap!’

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

But it is the dance that is the heart and soul of the film and that is delivered with an exacting joy. Just like all cartoon characters, the animators could push the limits of choreography and movement, combining them to allow Félicie to do Broadway jazz style one minute, and fluid ballet the next. And the story does emphasize that the right passion at the right time equals the moment that a prima ballerina can develop and perform.

“Raise your arms, and someone’s always there...” goes the poignant lyric in the song “At the Ballet.” As Woody Allen said in “Annie Hall,” we create art because we can’t get it right in real life. In that sense, the ballet must be hyper-artistic, an otherworldly form that brings something righteous to real life audiences.

“Leap!” opens everywhere on August 25th, in 3D and regular screenings. See local listings for 3D theaters and show times. Featuring the voices of Elle Fanning, Nat Wolff, Carly Rae Jepsen, Mel Brooks, Kate McKinnon, Terrence Scammell and Maddie Ziegler. Written by Éric Summer, Carol Noble and Laurent Zeitoun. Directed by Éric Summer and Éric Warin. Rated “PG”



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