

Wes Anderson's 'Isle of Dogs' is Inventive Delight

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on March 28, 2018 - 12:09pm

- [akira takayama](#) [2]
- [Bill Murray](#) [3]
- [Bob Balaban](#) [4]
- [Bryan Cranston](#) [5]
- [Edward Norton](#) [6]
- [F. Murray Abraham](#) [7]
- [Fantastic Mr. Fox](#) [8]
- [Fisher Stevens](#) [9]
- [Fox Searchlight Pictures](#) [10]
- [Frances McDormand](#) [11]
- [Greta Gerwig](#) [12]
- [Harvey Keitel](#) [13]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [14]
- [Isle of Dogs](#) [15]
- [Jeff Goldblum](#) [16]
- [Ken Watanabe](#) [17]
- [koyu rankin](#) [18]
- [kunichi nomura](#) [19]
- [Liev Schreiber](#) [20]
- [Movie Review](#) [21]
- [Scarlett Johansson](#) [22]
- [Spike Walters](#) [23]
- [Tilda Swinton](#) [24]
- [Wes Anderson](#) [25]
- [Yoko Ono](#) [26]



Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Fans of director Wes Anderson will find plenty to love in his second stop motion animated feature (after “Fantastic Mr. Fox”), entitled “Isle Of Dogs.” It’s an immersive and intricately detailed story set in Japan, and features a dizzying array of visual gags, along with Anderson’s trademark whimsy.

Anderson’s style has become a genre unto itself at this point, but that doesn’t mean he’s been making the same movie over and over again... “Isle Of Dogs” finds a way to refine and open up new avenues for the director to explore. The action takes place in the fictional Japanese metropolis of Megasaki. The Mayor (voice of Kunichi Nomura) belongs to a long line of cat fanciers. So he has banned all dogs from the city because of a case of “snout fever” and doggy flu, and they’re exiled on a giant garbage dump called “trash island.” But an orphan boy named Atari (Koyu Rankin), who also happens to be the mayor’s distant nephew, makes a daring journey to the island to find his beloved dog Spots (Liev Schreiber).

There’s also a familiar-but-fairly-inventive extended riff on the age old differences between cat people and dog people, which also carries plenty of political allegory. But it’s worth noting that Anderson never lets the message get in the way of the story... it’s subtle enough to make an impression without hijacking everything else around it.



Chief (voice of Bryan Cranston) in 'Isle of Dogs'
Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

Anderson also has left no detail behind, so naturally in a story about Japanese dogs living on an island of trash there would be the requisite fleas and ticks. But it's amazing how those bugs move along with the gently wispy hair of the canines in the frames. This is a masterpiece of animation craftsmanship that manages to delight and intrigue at the same time, with continual surprises. I didn't know I wanted to see what a stop-motion animated version of a kidney operation would look like, but I was amazed at what unfolded on screen.

Many of the usual stable of "Wes Anderson Players" lend their voices here, including Bill Murray, Edward Norton, Bob Balaban, Jeff Goldblum, Harvey Keitel, F. Murray Abraham, and Tilda Swinton. They're joined this time around by Bryan Cranston, who voices Chief, the leader of a pack of dogs who help the orphan boy (nicknamed the "Little Pilot") reunite with his "man's best friend." Jeff Goldblum scores the highest laugh ratio as Duke, a dog with his ear to the ground, who is always catching the other dogs up on the latest gossip. Additionally, Courtney B. Vance proves a swell fit for the "Narrator," a role usually filled by Alec Baldwin.



Atari (Koyu Rankin) Meets His Saviors in 'Isle of Dogs'
Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

As the film's prologue helpfully acknowledges, the dog barks have been translated into English, but all other Japanese protagonists speak entirely in their native tongue... they're either translated by various on screen translators or dictation translating machines. But that doesn't matter much, because there is such vivid detail on the screen you could still figure out what was going on.

Whether you are or are not a fan of Wes Anderson and his whimsical curio-films, this tale of a boy and his dog delivers the goods. But if you're like me, you'll probably spend the next several days after seeing it reliving all the Akira Kurosawa references crammed into the margins, that most likely you missed the first time. Domo arigato, Mr. Anderson.

"Isle of Dogs" opens in Chicago on March 28th, everywhere on April 6th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring the voices of Bryan Cranston, Edward Norton, Koyu Rankin, Bill Murray, Jeff Goldblum, Kunichi Nomura, Greta Gerwig, Frances McDormand, Scarlett Johansson, Harvey Keitel, F. Murray Abraham, Yoko Ono, Tilda Swinton, and Liev Schreiber. Screenplay and directed by Wes Anderson. Rated "PG-13"



[27]

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- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/bill-murray>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/bob-balaban>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/bryan-cranston>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/edward-norton>
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- [13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/harvey-keitel>
- [14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/hollywoodchicagocom-content>
- [15] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/isle-of-dogs>
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- [20] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/liev-schreiber>
- [21] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/review.html>
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