

‘The Nutcracker and the Four Realms’ is Beautiful, But Broken

Submitted by [JonHC](#) [1] on November 1, 2018 - 3:53pm

- [Disney](#) [2]
- [Eugenio Derbez](#) [3]
- [Helen Mirren](#) [4]
- [HollywoodChicago.com](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [Jake Whitehall](#) [7]
- [Jayden Fowora-Knight](#) [8]
- [Jon Espino](#) [9]
- [Keira Knightley](#) [10]
- [Mackenzie Foy](#) [11]
- [Morgan Freeman](#) [12]
- [Movie Review](#) [13]
- [Richard E. Grant](#) [14]
- [The Nutcracker and the Four Realms](#) [15]



Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Film has always felt like a much more accessible way to get cultured than, say, going to watch a play or opera. Watching a foreign film can educate you about the world and history as well as any play. “The Nutcracker and the Four Realms” promised that kind of experience, but your time is better served catching the actual ballet at a local theater instead.

This film was based on the magnificent Tchaikovsky ballet, which was in turn inspired by E.T.A. Hoffmann’s fantasy story, “The Nutcracker and the Mouse King.” What this film does it try to combine the two mediums—a gorgeous dance movement with a beautiful set design with hardly any plot, and a story full of fleshed out characters and adventure—to create something that is simultaneously both and neither. First-time writer Ashleigh Powell crafts the film’s story and plot to fit the children’s film mold, which leaves it feeling a lot less original and a lot more like one of those forgettable straight to home video sequels they released decades ago. Everything is straightforward with only one “major” twist you already know is coming. The motivations are vague and often verge on the comically nonsensical. Most characters can’t even get a coat of character development painted on them, just becoming pretty set pieces that we revisit when we need a shoddy line of exposition thrown in the mix to keep up from confused.



Each realm finally meeting Clara in ‘The Nutcracker and the Four Realms’

Photo credit: Disney

The only character who is actually treated like a person is Clara (Mackenzie Foy), our guide into this world. Clara is shown as strong and smart, but an emotional mess. To make sure that the audience understands just how unconventional Clara is, they make sure to emphasize her tomboy aesthetic, like the masculine quality of her clothes and her unkempt hair. Her motivation throughout the entire film is to figure out what she’s missing in her life, with the obvious realization later being that she’s had it all along. In the end, I do love the message, no matter

how many times I see it in films meant for children. It’s a strong message that bears repeating, but for once I’d like to see them change it up by having it delivered by a boy who is in touch with his feminine side. The film also does a good job of reminding us that judging people and things based on appearances is wrong. Sometimes, things that appear sweet are actually sour, and vice versa.

The world that “The Nutcracker and the Four Realms” attempts to create is the same one seen in every fairy tale landscape. There is the brightly colored, visually sumptuous area meant to symbolize goodness. Then there is a dying, decrepit forested area that is shrouded in shadow meant to personify malevolence. I understand this is the easiest route to go, but that never means it’s the best. There is a certain charm from practical effects and real sets that is lost when everything is created with CGI in front of an unflattering green screen.

The beauty of Tchaikovsky’s ballet doesn’t just come from the moving music or the mesmerizing choreography, but also the sets that are created in which the world is framed. The ballet tells the vaguest of stories, just giving you the bare bones of a plot while remaining engaging the entire time. Meanwhile, “The Nutcracker and the Four Realms” is all (ill-crafted) story, but without any depth narratively or visually. Even at under 100 minutes, this film feels much longer than that. The visual elements in the film are just like online dating—there is less wonder involved when it’s done on a computer.



Clara leading her army alongside her trusty Nutcracker in ‘The Nutcracker and the Four Realms’

Photo credit: Disney

Directors Lasse Hallström and Joe Johnston turn the film into a tonal tug of war of sorts. It should have been more aptly called “The Nutcracker and the Four Tones” because the films darts from tone to tone, leaving us dizzy, tone-deaf, and just plain confused. First, we are teased into thinking this is going to be a whimsical, “Narnia”-esque adventure, but then it turns into a horror show complete with a nightmarish rat king. That is then followed up by a “Wizard of Oz”-style exploration of the kingdom, complete with picking up new friends along the way. We are then treated to several scenes of ballet, which become the very best parts of the film, and should maybe have comprised the entire film altogether. At one point, it gets taken a little too far as they essentially recreate a scene from “Fantasia” where the orchestra is illuminated by a technicolor light show.

All of that ends up being murder on the pacing, which matches the inconsistency of everything else in the film. Aside from the few ballet sequences in the film, the only really enjoyable parts come in the form of the costume design and set concepts. As an homage to the Russian roots of this ballet, the film is filled with influences, from the design of buildings all the way to the soldier’s uniforms and some character designs (like the Russian nesting doll goons). The only costumes that were exempt from this were for the leaders of each realm, all of which had magnificently ornate outfits that embodied their realm perfectly. This is the sort of attention to detail I wish was placed throughout the entire film.

“The Nutcracker and the Four Realms” opens everywhere on November 2nd. Featuring Keira Knightley, Morgan Freeman, Mackenzie Foy, Eugenio Derbez, Helen Mirren, Richard E. Grant, and Jayden Fowora-Knight. Directed by Lasse Hallström and Joe Johnston. Written by Ashleigh Powell. Rated “PG”



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