

Isle of Dogs

Wes Anderson has crafted a unique career among American filmmakers with his highly stylized, jewel box movies, ripe with candy colors and often-static set-ups. Think of his recent efforts, like "Moonrise Kingdom" and "The Great Budapest Hotel." His latest film "Isle of Dogs," however, brings directly to mind his 2009 feature "Fantastic Mr. Fox." In his latest film, he again envisions a droll animal-centric world created in painstaking stop-action animation (with characters as tiny mobile models rather than drawn figures).

Here the animal protagonists are a whole population of dogs that have been forcibly removed from the fictional, futuristic Japanese city of Megasaki by order of its cruel mayor Kobayashi (Kinchi Nomura), using a ruse that the dogs have infected the population with "snout fever." The mayor's 12-year-old ward, the orphan Atari, (Koyi Rankin) thus loses his beloved bodyguard and companion, Spots (Liev Schreiber), who is shipped, like all other dogs, to Trash Island to live out a life of misery and starvation. The young man, desperate to save his dog, flies a miniature plane to the island, where he eventually enlists a posse of five variegated mongrels—led by the indomitable Chief—to retrieve his beloved pet, a search that leads them, through a bevy of doggie encounters, to the farthest corner of the toxic island.

Meanwhile, back in the city, Atari's quest finds a parallel in an underground movement to save all dogs headed by some thoughtful scientists and a plucky exchange student Tracy Walker (Greta Gerwig). The picture thus toggles between Trash Island sequences and the city's clandestine movement.

Peterson works out his story, as usual, with sundry kinds of eccentricity. His characters, dog and human, show an eyes-wide, face-front stolidity to the camera, often in symmetrical settings. Those settings are rendered very meticulously, like the detailed detritus on Trash Island (which recalls the environment of "WALL-E"), as well as beautifully, with some backdrops as colorful as a kaleidoscope's disc. Your eyes will find a treasure of lush and exquisite images to savor.

Most line deliveries are deadpan, if not monotonic, by an array of actors who have worked with Peterson before. You will probably recognize the voice talents of Scarlett Johansson, Edward Norton, Jeff Glodblum, Bob Balaban, Frances McDormand, Harvey Keitel, and Tilda Swinton, and inevitably, Anderson regular Bill Murray, who has made eight films with the director. The significant newcomer to the Anderson dog pound is Bryan Cranston, who growlingly voices the character of Chief. Perhaps to add some similitude to the picture, Anderson somewhat whimsically has most of Japanese characters speak Japanese without subtitles (though he cheats a bit by incorporating a translator--McDormand--into the storyline).

Though childlike and apparently naïve in many respects, "Isle of Dogs" is not for kiddies. It is rightly rated "PG-13" and contains some scary scenes of animal death and sushi making, for example. It is, however, fanciful, and while it will surely appeal to those Anderson fans who appreciate his special sensibilities, other filmgoers will just have to go with his flow. For those who can, it can be a rewarding fable.

(*The film, in English and Japanese (untranslated), runs 101 minutes and is rated "PG-13."*)

(March 2018)