

Spirit Untamed

Ever since the Disney company began producing a series of animated films featuring strong female characters with “Beauty and the Beast” (1991), Hollywood animation companies have focused on films with such figures as protagonists (“Pocahontas,” “Mulan,” “The Princess and the Frog,” “Frozen,” “Moana” etc.). Its principal competitor in this line of storytelling has been the studio Dreamworks, whose most recent entry into this genre is “Spirit Untamed,” the story of a feisty girl and her feisty mount, Spirit, an unbridled mustang with a chocolate forelock.

Lucky Prescott (voiced by Isabel Merced) has lost her mother, a famous horse-riding performer) and has been living with her Aunt Cora (Juliane Moore) out east, when her risk-taking become extreme and her aunt decides to reunite her with her father Jim (Jake Gyllenhaal) in the dusty Western town of Miradero.

Lucky is unimpressed with the sleepy little town but has a change of heart when she meets Spirit, a wild horse, Spirit, who leads a pack of mustangs. She also befriends two teenage riders, Abigail Stone and Pru Granger (Marsai Martin). Pru’s father, stalwart stable owner Al Granger (Andre Braugher), is Jim’s best friend.

A heartless horse wrangler (Walton Goggins) and his henchmen connive to capture Spirit and his herd and auction them off to a life of hard labor, Lucky enlists her friends to embark on a pursuit to rescue the horse who has given her a new sense of freedom and to help her discover a connection to her mother’s legacy. The outcome is pleasantly predictable.

Fully in the spirit of its predecessors, “Spirit Untamed” sports standard family film tropes: intrepid animal and kid triumph over bad guys, lead kid is inspired by a vivacious posse, cranky sidekick (Aunt Cora) guides kid, cherished parent is honored, occasional (but forgettable) songs are sprinkled onto the soundtrack, story is told against a handsome setting, etc.

The CGI animation is standard Dreamworks: characters with tight stylized bodies and large heads and even larger eyes, horses in massive, sturdy forms and driving, fluid movements, mixing both menace and compliance. The movie’s strongest feature is its treatment of a mythical American West, full of butterscotch hills, snow-cruled peaks, and weathered ochre plains.

These landscape elements are shown most effectively in a spectacular chase sequence right in the middle of the picture where Lucky bonds with her friends. Trying to tame the horse, she inadvertently spurs Spirit to race through the rugged, forbidding scenery. Still new to her mount, Lucky bravely hangs on to Spirit, as the burly mustang hurtles through rocky passes and dangerous turns, aided by Abigail and Pru, and proving she is as much of a horsewoman as her mom. This is animation amped up and exciting, the young woman taking on a contemporary “Perils of Pauline” and passing with flying colors.

(The film runs 87 mins, is rated “PG” and is now in cinemas.)

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