Movie Review: 'Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who!'

by Jane Clifford

The essential message in "Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who!" is respect. Horton's respect for the inhabitants of Whoville, whose world happens to be on a speck of dust.

'DR. SEUSS' HORTON HEARS A WHO!' - Protecting the inhabitants of Whoville with his trunk, Horton ventures to cross a rickety brdge in the humorous film 'Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who!' CNS Photo courtesy of Blue Sky Studios. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) You know the story, of course, that Horton hears voices from the speck, decides to save it from destruction, and how he's mocked by disbelievers until the Whos, in a desperate attempt to save themselves - and Horton - make enough noise to confirm their existence.

It's a simple story, told in 36 pages of text. Though there's considerably more going on in 88 minutes on film, the message is still clear. And what happens between the beginning and the end is a rollicking good time.

To keep an audience - even a very young, giggling one at a recent screening - engaged, you need to do more in 2008 than Seuss did in 1954, when the book was released.

So the creators of "Ice Age" walked a fine line, with Audrey Geisel as executive producer looking over their shoulders, to be as true to Seuss' vision as Horton was to the Whos.

The results are characters that pop off the screen, music that makes you want to hum along, a new best pal for Horton named Morton (Seth Rogen), a storyline that's expanded to include thingamajigs even the Cat in the Hat wouldn't recognize.

In one scene, Ms. Yelp (Niecy Nash) is defending the picture she's chosen for her "whospace.com" home page and, in another, one of the Whoville mayor's 96 daughters is whining for a "whoPhone" because everyone else has one.

There is a great deal of new dialogue, but it is rhyming and playful, and it works. New characters find their place, but Vlad (Will Arnett), the eagle in the book who steals the clover from Horton, has transformed into a huge flapping and foreboding thing, like a prehistoric condor with a wingspan the width of Baja California. And there are times when Horton is a little more type-A than Seuss intended.

Still, when you hear as many moms and dads laugh as do their young children, you know the movie is entertaining. The filmmakers have worked hard to keep the story honest. Charles Osgood is the perfect narrator, and the mayor is the perfect mensch, thanks to Steve Carell, supported by his long-suffering wife (Amy Poehler). You can almost see Carol Burnett smirking as the imperious Sour Kangaroo becomes determined to bring Horton down. And that's where Jim Carrey comes in. Despite a few moments of his trademark frantic, fast-talking mania, another side of him seamlessly merges with the shy, sweet elephant we all know and love.

"Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who!" Running time: 1 hour, 28 minutes. Rated: G. 3 1/2 stars.

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