Movie Review: 'Hannah Montana, The Movie' - Miley delivers feel-good message

by Jane Clifford

The lights went down in the movie theater and the crowd screamed. The Disney logo flashed on the screen and they screamed more loudly. And when Miley Cyrus appeared in the opening scene, the audience of hundreds, average age about 9, went nuts.

RATINGS GUIDE:

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) "Hannah Montana: The Movie" will be a hit with its target demographic. And why not? The "Hannah Montana" series on The Disney Channel is huge. Miley Cyrus, its star singer/songwriter/actor, is huge.

So, what kind of movie is it? Well, above all, it's a film to extend the Hannah/Miley franchise â€” about a young girl (Miley Stewart) who lives a normal life by day and is a rock star (Hannah Montana) at night and tries to keep that double life a secret.

In the film, Miley is close to losing her identity, as Hannah takes over more and more of her life. The action opens in L.A., where Miley is almost late for her own concert. She and her BFF, Lilly (Emily Osment), are careening down the halls at the concert venue in a golf cart they grabbed. We watch as Miley adds makeup and more to emerge as Hannah onstage before thousands of adoring fans. Then it's off to say a quick goodbye to brother Jackson (Jason Earles), who's bound for college, and then on to Lilly's 16th birthday party at Santa

Monica Pier.

But Miley/Hannah, accompanied by her agent, Vita, played perfectly by Vanessa Williams, is detoured at a shoe store, where she spies a present for Lilly. Enter Tyra Banks, one of many cameo performers in the film, who does a hilarious bit with Hannah, fighting over a pair of shoes.

It's the first of several slapstick scenes that show Cyrus to be a natural at physical comedy, possibly making grandparents in the theater think of Lucille Ball.

After the disastrous birthday party where Hannah is supposed to show up as Miley, but doesn't have time to change and draws all attention away from Lilly, Miley misses the meeting with her brother and is going to bail on her grandmother's birthday because Vita's gotten her a gig in New York. That's when dad steps in. Played in the film and on the TV show by Miley's real-life dad, Billy Ray Cyrus, Robby Ray Stewart has had it. He accompanies her on the small jet for the gig, but it lands in Crowley Corners, Tenn.

That's when the film turns heartwarming. She's home â€” her real home is Nashville, where much of the filming took place, including a farm not far from the one where Miley grew up. She is surrounded by loving family, especially her grandmother, Ruby, the talented Southern actress Margo Martindale. And she meets Lucas, played sweetly by hunky Southern newcomer Travis Brody.

The audience at the screening "ooh-ed" at the romance building between Miley and Lucas, and the one Ruby encourages between Robby Ray and the farm foreman, Lorelai (Melora Hardin).

To complicate matters, there's a tabloid reporter, ably played by Peter Gunn, who follows Miley to Tennessee, trying to figure out her secret. And there are comedic turns by Barry Bostwick as the bad guy who wants to change the town by adding a mall, and the mayor, played by Beau Billingslea, who wants things to stay the same.

There's a ton of good, down-home music â€” some provided on-screen by Rascal Flatts and Taylor Swift â€” and one great dance number that every young kid in the country will be attempting to learn after they see it. (Billy Ray Cyrus gets into the act, too, singing a song from his brand-new album, "Back to Tennessee," released by â€” surprise! â€” Disney.)

The cinematography nicely showcases the bucolic Tennessee countryside, and able direction by Peter Chelsom ("Serendipity") holds things together.

In the end, this is a feel-good film that feeds what seems to be an insatiable appetite for all things Miley. But it also explores the importance of family, the relationship between a father and daughter, and remembering where you came from no matter how far you go. Let's hope that works for one talented 16-year-old.

"Hannah Montana: The Movie." Rated: G. Running time: 1 hour, 42 minutes. 2.5 stars.

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