

Movie Review: 'Surf's Up'

by David_Elliott

Are they more endearing than the very cool birds of "March of the Penguins"? Maybe not. Are they cuter than the cartoon birds of "Happy Feet"? You bet your bottom clam they are.

'SURF'S UP' - Shia LaBeouf is the voice behind the character Cody Maverick in the animated movie 'Surf's Up.' CNS Photo courtesy of Columbia Pictures/Sony Pictures. In "Surf's Up," they mostly inhabit an Antarctic crust of ice, but northerly lies the lush, tropic isle Pengu, where birds flock for the annual Big Z Memorial surfing showdown. The host is TV ratings hustler (and beaver) Reggie Belafonte, who has a Don King stack of hair and the jackhammer juice of James Woods.

Star time really belongs to Cody Maverick (Shia LaBeouf), a young surf wannabe from way down south with rakish feathered brows, eager to challenge reigning wave titan and egotist Tank Evans (Diedrich Bader). Tank has Maori feather tattoos and calls his trophies "my ladies," although they look like phallic bling.

In a world where even sweetly curvy fem-birds like lifeguard Lani (Zooey Deschanel) talk the dude talk, who shall rule but, inevitably, The Dude himself? That can only be Jeff Bridges as Geek, who has a close relation to the late Big Z and rolls Dude inflections from "The Big Lebowski" right down his gut, a true Diamond Head of beer bellies.

"Surf's Up" is animated in all ways, cleverly. It's a tiki shrine of surfer cultism, with funny and fond spoofs of beach boy documentaries like "Riding Giants" (during a huge curler, we hear the voices of actual surfers). Geek, true to the primal code of Duke Kahanamoku and The Dude's code of slacker savvy, teaches Cody that fun, not winning, is the crest of the wave.

Cartoonishly surging with liquid color, digital waves and jokes that even include gefilte fish, "Surf's Up" never forgets to have fun. Consider Chicken Joe (Jon Heder), a skinny fowl who has learned to surf on Lake Michigan but now challenges Tank, perhaps as compensation for his father's having become "a six-piece combo" of fast food.

Only with a scene of rock-surfing through caves of volcanic lava does the movie fall into theme-park terrain. And like Michelangelo moved by marble, Geek devoutly shows Cody how to carve his own board: "It's inside (the log) somewhere. You gotta find it, bring it out."

RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) From a slab of Hollywood plastic, the talkin' critters template, the makers of "Surf's Up" have shaped a good board. It rides the tube, dude.

A Sony Pictures release. Directors: Ash Brannon, Chris Buck. Writers: Lisa Addario, Christian Darren. Voice cast: Jeff Bridges, Shia LaBeouf, Zooey Deschanel, Jon Heder, James Woods, Diedrich Bader. Running time: 1 hour, 27 minutes. Rated PG. 3 stars.

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