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Raya and the Last Dragon represents a significant milestone for Walt Disney Animation Studios. With the Covid-19 pandemic impacting the film industry, Disney’s latest animated feature is the first to be completed remotely, with over 900 employees animating, problem solving, and conducting other vital work from home.It’s a testament to the team’s work, then, that this sudden change in working circumstances doesn’t really show. Raya and the Last Dragon bears the hallmarks you would expect from a Disney production, and its celebration of Southeast Asian culture - albeit set within a dark story by their standards - is another step on the company’s redemptive journey towards greater representation within its movies.Raya and the Last Dragon takes place 500 years after a potentially world-ending event. Historically, humans lived peacefully alongside dragons, but the emergence of the Druun - a mindless plague born of darkness - threatened to destroy life as they knew it. As the dragons fought bravely to protect humanity, the fabled Sisu (Akwafina) concentrated her magic into the Dragon Gem - a stone of immense power - and, with a single blast, eradicated the Druun. Those humans who had been turned to stone by the Druun came back to life, but the dragons who had perished did not.With only one source of dragon magic left in the world, humanity fought over the precious gem, which resulted in the land of Kumandra being divided into five regions. Generations later, after a seemingly harmonious gathering of the tribes - brokered by Heart Lands chiefJain Benja (Daniel Dae Kim) - goes wrong, the Dragon Gem is broken into five pieces, allowing the Druun to return. The titular Raya (Kelly Marie Tran) now seeks out Sisu, the last dragon, to rebuild the gem, destroy the Druun for good, and be reunited with her father Benja after the Druun turned him to stone.Amazing animation and authentic influences(Image credit: Walt Disney Animation Studios)As you’d expect from a Disney production, Raya and the Last Dragon looks gorgeous. The movie’s brief 2D segments, much like the tattoo scenes in 2016’s Moana, are as polished as its 3D elements, and add a refreshing change of pace when they are utilized. Raya’s 2D sequences and images are mainly reserved for its historical context, but it works well in separating the present day events from those that took place in Kumandra’s past.Speaking of Moana, that movie’s water animation effects have been improved further in Raya and the Last Dragon. Given the significance of water as a life-giver in Southeast Asian culture, ensuring that the aquatic flow, ferocity, and reflections in each had to be on point. Thankfully, every river, waterfall, and rainstorm looks as realistic as can be expected.That extends into the film’s other Southeast Asian values and heritage. For the most part, Raya and the Last Dragon authentically replicates these elements well. Combat styles employed by Raya and adversary Namaari (Gemma Chan), such as Pencak Silat and Muay Thai respectively, have their roots in Malaysia and Thailand, while food items including a take on Thailand’s Tom Yum soup feature heavily throughout. Add in historically accurate clothing, architecture, and traditions - such as the removal of footwear in spiritual places - and Raya and the Last Dragon is a film steeped in Asian culture.It’s indicative of Disney’s strides towards promoting inclusion within its fictional worlds. The utilization of a Southeast Asian Story Trust - composed of experts and Disney’s own employees with roots in that region - and visits to Vietnam and Indonesia, among other Southeast Asian nations, have paid dividends in that respect.(Image credit: Walt Disney Animation Studios)That isn’t to say that Raya and the Last Dragon gets everything right. The movie has drawn criticism from some quarters for its lack of Southeast Asian actor castings, and it’s a valid concern to raise given that the movie is based upon this region. Raya’s cast ultimately sticks the landing - more on this later - but it feels like Disney missed an opportunity, here.The humor on offer is very hit and miss, too. There are some laugh out loud moments in Raya, but for every one of those, there are two or three jokes that struggle to land. It feels as if the movie’s dark, underlying tone of mistrust and disunity - one that hits close to home thanks to 2020’s worldwide upheaval - took precedence over its lighthearted schtick. Akwafina’s goofy portrayal of Sisu aside, Raya and the Last Dragon fails to raise more than a smile in most instances.While Raya’s comedic moments aren’t all that, its cast thrives everywhere else. Tran and Akwafina’s buddy relationship is a joy, and the juxtaposition between Raya’s cynical worldview and Sisu’s optimism work well in tandem. Chan’s portrayal of the conflicted Namaari, too, is solid, while Isaac Wang and Benedict Wong - as Boun and Tong - provide strong supporting roles. Alan Tudyk is on fine form with his animal roar repertoire for Raya’s armadillo-cum-dog companion Tuk Tuk, and it wouldn’t be surprising if stuffed toy versions of Raya’s steed fly off the shelves, such is his cute demeanour.Unlike Disney’s other recent original productions, Raya and the Last Dragon doesn’t come packed with musical numbers. That will be a disappointment - or relief - to some, but the lack of traditional sing-along tunes doesn’t hinder the plot. If anything, it helps the story to flow, and James Newton Howard’s score lends plenty of gravitas to emotional scenes and action-based sequences.Of those action-oriented moments, it’s the choreographed battles that stand out. Raya’s chase sequences are par for the course and all-too-brief, but skirmishes between Raya and Namaari - thanks to those real-world fighting styles - fit seamlessly into Kumandra’s fictional world. One such example plays out during the film’s emotionally charged, action-packed finale, but it ends up taking a backstage role as Raya’s merry band of outcasts attempts to stop the wider Druun threat.Verdict(Image credit: Walt Disney Animation Studios)Raya and the Last Dragon utilizes Disney’s tried and tested formula to tell a compelling if clichéd story. Its attempt at cultural representation mostly hits the mark but, while there’s plenty to like about the company’s latest animated feature, some viewers may feel a tad underwhelmed by its lack of sing-along moments, humor, and lengthy action sequences.Really, though, it’s the film’s emotional core that is its biggest draw. Raya’s themes of working together and building trust, and its resemblance to more mature, old school 2D flicks including The Lion King, feels emblematic of our times. That’s because it pedals the line that humanity’s greatest foe is itself, and it’s hard not to take stock of its moral message as the credits roll. Some viewers may be underwhelmed by that point, but families will certainly enjoy it for what it is.Raya and the Last Dragon is in cinemas where available, and on Disney+ with Premier Access, from March 5.Disney Plus UK: how to sign up, Star, WandaVision and more explained Been waiting for your Disney fix? It’s here: The animation studio’s latest film, Raya and the Last Dragon, releases today, and if you want to watch it, now’s the perfect time to sign up for Disney+. The movie stars Kelly Marie Tran as Raya, a warrior tasked with tracking down the last surviving dragon in a bid to stop an ancient enemy once and for all. Read on to find out more about how to watch Raya and the Last Dragon online. Directed By: Carlos Lopez Estrada, Don Hall Cast: Kelly Marie Tran, Akwafina, Gemma Chan, Alan Tudyk, Ross Butler, Daniel Dae Kim Runtime: 90 minutes How to watch Raya and the Last Dragon online in the U.S. Disney+ is a relative newcomer to a crowded and competitive streaming market, but as an exclusive platform for all things Disney (that includes the subsidiaries of the House of Mouse such as Marvel and Star Wars, too), it has taken off in a big way. It’s the go-to place for streaming everything from new movies like Soul and Raya and the Last Dragon to exclusive shows like WandaVision and The Mandalorian. The entire catalog of Disney properties is available on-demand as well, with new content being added constantly. Disney+ rings in at \$7 per month or \$70 per year. Directed by Carlos Lopez Estrada and Don Hall, Raya and the Last Dragon is a fantasy tale set in the world of Kumandra where people and dragons once live side-by-side in peace. That peace was threatened by the monstrous Druun, but the dragons sacrificed themselves to save their human allies, almost to the point of total annihilation. When the Druun finally return centuries later, a young warrior named Raya (voiced by Kelly Marie Tran) must track down the last living dragon to put an end to the Druun for good. If you want to watch Raya and the Last Dragon online today, then you can sign up for Disney+ for just \$7 per month or \$70 per year. If you’re looking for a larger streaming bundle, then you can also grab The Disney Bundle which costs just \$13 per month and includes Disney+ along with Hulu (ad-supported) and ESPN+, saving you 25% on their combined subscription prices. If you already have any of these services, you can still upgrade to The Disney Bundle and get the same discount. Not sure if it’s worth your hard-earned cash? Check out our Raya and the Last Dragon review. Editors’ Recommendations Tomorrow, Disney+ will begin offering its latest movie Raya and the Last Dragon on the streaming service. As with previous major Disney+ releases like Mulan, you’ll need to spend an extra \$30 on top of your usual subscription fee to watch the film. That’s because it’s part of the service’s Premier Access which offers viewers a chance to see movies they’d normally only be able to see at movie theaters. Don’t want to spend the extra \$30? Wait until June 4 and you can watch it for free as part of your regular Disney+ subscription. Of course, that is three months away. Read on as we explain all about the new movie and what else is new on Disney+. Raya and the Last Dragon is Disney’s 59th movie. Featuring a predominantly Asian American cast, the movie tells the tale of the world of Kumandra, where humans and dragons live together in harmony. That harmony is broken when sinister monsters known as the Druun threaten the safety of the land and the dragons sacrifice themselves to save humanity. Fast forward 500 years, and the evil Druun have returned and it’s down to one lone warrior — Raya — and her pet pill bug companion Tuk Tuk to find the last dragon of Kumandra in a bid to save everyone. In typical Disney style, there’s a fantastic soundtrack along with Disney’s first-ever Filipino-language song titled Gabay. A brilliant voice cast including Star Wars: The Last Jedi’s Kelly Marie Tran, and Akwafina bring further life to the story. And of course, it’s yet another example of just how fantastic a service Disney+ is. Disney+ offers access to almost all of Disney’s past movies along with fantastic Disney shorts, and so much more from the company’s extensive portfolio. Whether you want to catch up on classics like Toy Story or enjoy all that Marvel and Star Wars have to offer (including smash hits like The Mandalorian and Wandavision), it’s all here on Disney+. Fast becoming your next essential streaming service to always have available to you, Raya and the Last Dragon should cement that even further. Right now, you can choose to pay \$30 to watch the latest movie or wait it out until June 4. Whatever you decide, you still have plenty of other great shows and movies to catch up on via Disney+. Editors’ Recommendations Disney fans who spent the Christmas holiday streaming the Pixar feature Soul for their kids via Disney Plus may be a little confused this weekend. Disney Animation’s latest film, Raya and the Last Dragon, which is out March 5 and is about a Southeast Asian warrior princess on a quest to find a dragon that will unite her people, will also be on Disney Plus, but subscribers will have to pay an additional \$30 to see it, at least right now. This summer, the film will be available to all Disney Plus subscribers for free. There’s one additional wrinkle: Raya is also being released in theaters. Well, some of them. Cinemark, the third-biggest movie theater chain in the United States is refusing to show the film, reportedly because Disney’s financial terms were too onerous for a movie that is also being released on streaming. Consumer whiplash? Just a tad. This is a phenomenon that points to how entertainment conglomerates are still very much in experimentation mode when it comes to settling the streaming vs. theatrical debate, particularly when it comes to kids’ films. It also underlines just how many kinks still have not been worked out (i.e., with theater chains). For a sense of how chaotic and unresolved it all is—and how there is truly no single, settled-upon formula—consider that on March 4, Paramount released The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge on the Run exclusively on its new streaming platform, Paramount Plus, as well on premium video-on-demand rental platforms for \$19.99. A week earlier, Warner Bros. released Tom & Jerry both in theaters and on HBO Max (at no extra charge). According to Paul Dergarabedian, senior media analyst for Comscore, this is the new world order wrought by the pandemic that has wreaked havoc on the theater exhibition business. “Are you going to go streaming or theatrical? That used to be the question, and there were two answers,” he says. “Now there are 10, 15 answers and permutations of how you can release a movie.” Raya’s rollout mirrors Disney’s release of the live-action Mulan last summer, an approach that confused consumers—as well as generated ire. Thirty bucks when subscribers were already paying \$7 a month for Disney Plus?From Disney’s point of view, the hybrid model is a way to hang on to whatever box-office dollars can still be had. Before the pandemic hit, Disney, after all, was the box-office king. The company generated \$11 billion in theater tickets in 2019, a milestone CEO Bob Chapek has characterized as “a really big deal to us.” This makes Disney more incentivized to try to make theatrical work, hence its “three-pronged” strategy for COVID-19-era releases. Disney has said that it’s either releasing films first in theaters exclusively; in theaters and on streaming simultaneously with a “premiere access” fee for Disney Plus subscribers; or, as with Soul, releasing them at no additional cost on Disney Plus.With Raya, there’s even more driven to open the film in theaters, given that more of them are open. In China, where Disney hopes the film will connect (Chinese actress Zhao Liying is dubbing the voice of Raya for local audiences), business is booming. February saw record numbers at the Chinese box office, even though theaters are operating at half capacity. The surge has been driven by the Lunar New Year, when people around the country are stuck at home due to travel restrictions. Feeling cooped up and bored, they have been flocking to the movies. This helped propel Tom & Jerry to a strong-for-the-pandemic opening weekend of \$38 million, infusing hope that people will, indeed, be lured back to the movies. As for Soul, Chapek has described its freebie status as “a really nice thing to do for our consumer base.” It was also a way to win the Christmas season streaming wars—when HBO Max launched Wonder Woman 1984 and Netflix unleashed a series of new movies and TV shows, including Shonda Rhimes’s Bridgerton—and give Disney Plus another boost. Which it did. The service added 8 million new subscribers in December alone (it now has 95 million in total), a leap owed both to Soul as well as a new season of The Mandalorian.But while it all may make sense from a corporate point of view, consumers don’t have access to Disney’s latest PowerPoint presentation, nor did they likely listen in to Disney’s marathon Investor Day conference last December where executives laid out much of this strategic planning. To regular folks, Disney’s toggling strategy simply amounts to confusion and frustration. Disney may be allowing itself to have it both ways, but over time it may lose out as viewers seek simpler options. This weekend, after all, SpongeBob is just a click away.

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