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‘SONG OF THE SEA’ : TORONTO REVIEW

After making the Oscar-nominated "The Secret of Kells," director Tomm Moore sticks to Irish folklore for his latest film

Song of the Sea is another satisfying smack in the face of computer-generated 3D animation from Irish director Tomm Moore, after his earlier, Oscar-nominated The Secret of Kells. Working with wondrous watercolor backgrounds and 2D animation in which the impressions of depth and perspective are almost exclusively suggested through overlapping flat surfaces, this pleasingly old-school item again relies on Irish folklore and legends to color a familiar story about a young boy venturing out into a dark and enchanted world. Slightly more accessible than Kells in the story department and just as gorgeous, this GKids title stands a solid chance of capturing some of that earlier film's success both on the awards circuit and at the box office.

Ben (voiced by David Rawle) is the smart-alecky, occasionally grumpy 10-year-old of the burly if forlorn Conor (Brendan Gleeson, who voiced the Abbot in Kells), a widower who mans a lonely lighthouse on an island off the Irish coast. As shown in a brief prologue, Ben's mother (Lisa Hannigan) died when giving birth to his kid sister, Saoirse, who's now six but has never spoken a word. Audiences quickly learn -- though Ben doesn't until much later -- that the little girl has inherited a special gift from her mother: she's a "selkie," a seal-child who becomes human when on land (and here needs a special coat to turn back into a seal in the water).

Things start to go haywire when the kids' bossy grandmother (Fionnula Flanagan) manages to take them to Dublin, away from the dreary and dangerous lighthouse and the sea. But thankfully for the siblings there's a special shell that their mother gave them which, when blown like a horn, is able to summon luminous little particles that dance in the air like fireflies and that seem to indicate the way back home.

However, the way back home is an adventure- and peril-filled affair, as Ben and Saoirse discover that many of the creatures their mother told Ben stories about -- which, in a beautiful touch, were richly illustrated by the entire family on the walls of their lighthouse home -- actually really exist and some of them might need their help or can help them. The narrative's general rites-of-passage layout is of course extremely familiar, though, especially for foreign audiences, many of the stories-within-stories and characters that dot this particular journey will feel new as well as delightful.

Something similar happens in terms of the visuals, overseen by French-born, Ireland-based production designer Adrien Merigeau, who also worked on *Kells* and who here combines familiar 2D elements with details that make them look fresh and often quite extraordinary. The backgrounds, in watercolors, have a slightly hazy quality that suggests mist and the general dampness that are both typical of Ireland. The contours of both some of the background elements and some details of the characters are highlighted by the choice to often keep the outlines a couple of shades lighter (rather than either darker or entirely black). This works especially well for the story's many dark stones, which have salmon-colored outlines (with motifs partially inspired by Pictish stone carving) that clearly betray the mythical creatures that are hiding within them even as they literally stand petrified.

Even more so than in *Kells*, the characters themselves show a clear debt to the anime of Studio Ghibli, with the occasional touch of modernist painters such as Klee or Kandinsky, who were unafraid of colors and shapes and who preferred emotional intensity over photographic likeness. Though foregrounds and backgrounds are easy enough to distinguish because elements overlap, there's a very intentional flatness to the way in which the pictorial space is rendered as things simply placed behind or on top of each other (one could almost claim the film's in "anti-3D"). For an even more pronounced touch of funky cubism, shapes such as the lid of a trash can, for example, are drawn as a full circle (i.e., an overhead view) rather than a more traditional sideways view which would turn it into an oval shape, smartly infusing the film with both a child-like perspective while winking to those in the audience with a knowledge of art history.

One of the most striking visual elements is the film's attention to light, from the floating particles to the sunlight that streams in through the windows through an aurora borealis-like explosion in the sky during the film's straightforward but extremely affecting closing scenes. Even if older audiences might find the story somewhat thin, there's so much to enjoy on a purely audiovisual level that few will complain, with the feather-light score from Bruno Coulais and Irish band Kila, who earlier collaborated on *Kells*, another major asset.

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/song-sea-toronto-review-732446>

SCREENDAILY

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Author : Mark Adams

Song Of The Sea



Dir: Tomm Moore. Ireland-Luxembourg-Belgium-France-Denmark. 2014. 93mins

A quite delightful piece of magical animation, *Song Of The Sea* – the follow-up film from Tomm Moore, who made the Oscar-nominated *The Secret Of The Kells* – is a real pleasure. A bewitching, moving and often enchanting film, it eschews the current trend for computer-generated 3-D animation to weave an enthralling reinterpretation of Irish folktales.

The beautiful watercolour animation helps to create a stunning and often magical world.

Sophisticated enough to appeal to adults and packed with enough humour and adventure to work for youngsters, *Song Of The Sea* is a real animated gem, and one of the real pleasures of the Toronto Film Festival. It will likely appeal to discerning distributors and should mop up awards when it comes to animation festivals.

Its painterly style is like that of a gorgeously illustrated favourite book, and while the beautifully rendered flat animation is wonderfully idiosyncratic it also rather perfectly suits the magical folktale storyline.

Ten year-old Ben (voiced by David Rawle) lives on an island with his younger sister Saoirse, his dog Cú and his lighthouse keeper father Conor (a wonderfully mild Brendan Gleeson). His most prized possession is large seashell that can be used to create music, given to him his mother Bronagh (Lisa Hannigan) just before she died. He is still angry that she is gone and can't really accept his little sister, despite his excitement for her arrival when his mother was pregnant.

The shell, which young Bronagh – who hasn't uttered a word - is also enchanted by, is a tangible link to his mother and a reminder of the stories she told of magical creatures and wonderful strange worlds. One night Saoirse takes the shell, unlocks her mother's old trunk and wearing a strange white coat she finds here heads into the sea to play with a group of seals. It seems she is a Selkie, a being that lives as a human on earth and a seal in the water.

But after Saoirse is found at the water's edge the next day, the children's concerned but blunt grandmother (Fionnula Flanagan) takes them off the island and to the city. But the siblings decide to try and make their way back to the island that they love so much. Their journey sees that encountering both friends and those not-so friendly as they come see that the mystical stories that their mother used to tell have a bearing on the situations they face.

The beautiful watercolour animation helps to create a stunning and often magical world, and while grumpy Ben (as he and his father struggle to deal with loss) and his romping dog may be familiar characters they are pitched into a swirling world of folk tales, magical creatures and clever metaphor. Tomm Moore's animation is a unique pleasure and is wonderfully complemented by the score from Bruno Coulais which helps define this uniquely Irish tale of magical creatures and dealing with loss. Familiar issues to many an animation film are tackled – loss, family, honour and a heroic journey – but Moore's delightful animation makes the story all the more magical, magnificent and memorable.

Production company: Melusine Productions, The Big Farm, Superprod, Nørlum, Cartoon Saloon

International sales: WestEnd Films, www.westendfilms.com

Producer: Tomm Moore, Ross Murray, Paul Young, Stephan Roelants, Serge Umé, Marc Umé, Isabelle Truc, Clément Calvet, Jérémie Fajner, Frederik Villumsen, Claus Toksvig Kjaer

Screenplay: William Collins

Editor: Darragh Byrne

Music: Bruno Coulais, Kíla

Production designer: Adrien Merigeau

Main cast: Brendan Gleeson, David Rawle, Fionnula Flanagan, Pat Shortt, Jon Kenny, Liam Hourican, Colm Ó'Snodaigh, Lucy O'Connell, Kevin Swierszcz, Lisa Hannigan

<http://www.screendaily.com/reviews/the-latest/song-of-the-sea/5077509.article>