



BRAVE is one of the March, 2014 LVCA dvd donations to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania.

United States / United Kingdom 2012 93 minutes color feature animation dramedy
Walt Disney Pictures / PIXAR Animation Studios Producers: Katherine Sarafian and Mary Alice Drumm

11 of a possible 20 points

*** of a possible *****

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or vocal performance

Points

- 1 Film Co-Directors: Mark Andrews, Brenda Chapman, Steve Purcell
- 1 Film Editors: Nicholas Smith, Torbin Xan Bullock, Robert Grahamjones, David Suther, Serena Warner
- 2 Animation Camera: Robert Anderson*
- 1 Lighting: Danielle Feinberg
- 1 Screenplay: Mark Andrews, Michael Arndt, Brenda Chapman, Irene Mecchi, Steve Purcell
Story: Brenda Chapman
- 1 Music: Patrick Doyle Orchestrator: James Shearman Arranger: Patrick Doyle
- 1 Production Designer: Steve Pilcher
- 1 Sound: E. J. Holowicki, Gary Rydstrom (Sound Designers), Gwendolyn Yates Whittle (Supervising Sound Editor), Doug Ford, Steve Morris (Sound Recording)
- 1 Voices Cast
- 1 Creativity

11 total points

Voices Cast: Kelly Macdonald (Merida, a princess of Scotland), Emma Thompson (Elinor, a queen of Scotland and mother of Merida), Billy Connolly (King Fergus, Merida's father), Julie Walters (The Witch), Robbie Coltrane (Lord Dingwall), Kevin McKidd (Lord MacGuffin and Young MacGuffin), Sally Kinghorn and Eilidh Fraser (Maudie, the nanny), Peigi Barker (Young Merida), Steven Cree (Young Macintosh), Steve Purcell (The Witch's Crow), Callum O'Neill (Wee Dingwall), Patrick Doyle (Martin), John Ratzenberger (Gordon)

Though credit must go to Pixar for trailblazing into heroine territory with BRAVE, the result is less satisfying than many of their previous productions. The character of Princess Merida herself is quite

winning and tension between mother and daughter is effectively and realistically communicated. However, there are several major stumbling blocks present. Male characters lack credible embodiment, being nothing more than boisterous brawlers and witless wonders. Empowered females don't need to be surrounded by cardboard dimwit males in order to appear superior. It's quite obvious Merida's brains come from her mother. But can't any males be portrayed as thoughtful or something other than simple brawny bullies, bottomless stomachs, and unfeeling mischiefmakers?

Part of the blame lies in a screenplay which settles too readily for picturesque Scottish vocabulary, much of it untranslatable by foreigners, and scenery. Characterization of even juvenile males is the basest and sketchiest of stereotypes. There's more personality in the witch's crow, which someone took pains to anthropomorphize, rendering it glib, inquisitive, unapologetically rude. Even the evil prince that becomes Mordu the Bear, is, by contrast, simply greedy for power. There is no explanation of why or how he alone, raised in the same environment as three brothers, turned to murderous lust for power. It is lamentably apparent males in this film are no more than convenient plot devices.

Another drawback is unnecessary resort to obscene vulgarity. The cheap off color joke is used by males here as a substitute for delightful wit employed by female counterparts. Did filmmakers despair of being able to entice boys to this female empowerment film by any other means? It's more than slightly depressing to find filmmakers so destitute of invention the expedient of resort to the lowest possible common denominator has become a given.

On the positive side, Merida makes an intelligent and credible heroine, something still too rarely seen in contemporary animations. She is precipitous, nimble, obstinate, self-reliant, unimpressed by flashy exteriors, and resourceful. This princess is also vain, self-centered and recklessly irresponsible. By no means flawless.

Her mom is disciplined, dignified, loving, diligent, imperious, organized, playful. This makes for a winning combination, as well as a regal one. Viewers have little choice but to root for her reunion with a misguided daughter. Certainly there's no benefit accruing from supporting the triumph of either witch or Mordu. While the former is certainly funny and intelligent, she's too fickle and underhanded to enlist empathy. Her mistreatment of others, including a crow companion and henchbird, is by no means exemplary.

The plot of BRAVE concerns Merida's attempts to short-circuit Mom's marital plans for her. If necessary, she's even willing to compete with suitors for her own hand, an extreme display of narcissism that puts to shame swaggerings of her most overconfident suitor. None of these designated candidates for marital bliss are even provided with sensibly sturdy names. Instead, there is Dingwall, McGuffin --- the latter clearly a tribute to Alfred Hitchcock --- and Macintosh, who might be homage to an apple or a computer, but certainly not to Scottish nobility. Mandated a choice between giant of stupidity, arrogant poser, and clumsy simpleton, the princess cannot be faulted for declaring the entire process a shameful sham. It will be impossible for her to love any of these overmatched aristocrats. To pretend tolerance of them is degrading and repugnant. Even her archery outshines theirs.

At the climax of an extended wrangle with Mom over denying access to these patently unsuitable wooers, Merida rips apart a tapestry of the royal family. In doing so, she inattentively isolates the figure of Queen Elinor from the rest. Elinor counters by pitching Merida's beloved bow into the fireplace, hardly an act of reconciliation. Each obtains temporary revenge and more lasting grief through impulsive action. For one brief critical moment, reason is blindsided, leading to disastrous consequences.

All arguments failing to convince Mom to listen to them, let alone accept and approve, Merida gallops madly off into the world of nature, someplace she thinks is more hospitable and receptive. For reasons only known to scripters, she decides to follow a kind of aerial trail provided by will-o'-the-wisps to a witch's cottage. There the princess hopes to obtain either foreknowledge of the future, a magic potion to change her mother's resolution, hypnotic power to bend Elinor to her daughter's will, or a combination of all three. Instead, she's tricked by a wily operator into trading an heirloom necklace for a concoction which will transform Mother, perceived as the root of all filial unhappiness.

In return for the antique, the hag, who owes more than a little to the scheming matron of SPIRITED AWAY, creates an enchanted cake. This she gifts to Merida, knowing full well it is only likely to result in another irreversible regal metamorphosis. Ultimate ends are not her concern. Only imminent profits. How such a mercenary capitalist wandered into a medieval wonder tale is unknown. Merida, happy again, reverses course and sets off to try the effect of supernatural compulsion on her hapless parent.

The consequence of eating this witch's concoction is reversion to a bruin's manners and form. Bears appear to be royal nemeses, a specially nasty one called Mordu being responsible for ripping off King Fergus's leg in an earlier confrontation at a family picnic. So there's poetic justice in the alteration. If Merida is ripe for a lesson in obedience, Elinor is overdue one in humbleness. Having to conduct herself as a wild animal seems reasonably appropriate.

Many critics of the film have opined that Merida neither matures nor evinces any demonstrable courage, though her mother does. This is patently untrue. Elinor lacks humility, patience, ability to view situations from the perspectives of others, knowledge of woodlore. Merida needs to acquire respect, responsibility, wisdom, empathy. By film's conclusion, she's progressed to the extent of showing newfound respect for legendary wisdom and mother's useful gift for oratory. Her sympathy for the plights of hirsute Mom and blindly vicious Mordu is unfeigned. It is Merida alone among the royals who comprehends the looming possibility Elinor will become a second Mordu, at least partly because of her inability to brook dissension. Not, by the way, any kind of royal virtue. If Elinor evidences courage in defending her "cub" against Mordu, Merida shows equal bravery when defying the ancestral convention of parental marriage contracts. Especially since no one in the film, male nor female, supports her defiance.

What muddies the waters is overdependence on supernatural elements. The legend of Mordu is unnecessary to tell this tale. BRAVE is not concerned, after all, with the fate of an avaricious and homicidal aristocrat. At its center is a fragile and damaged mother-daughter relationship which needs re-cemented. This is of universal interest. Just proceeding with ramifications of the marriage contest could in itself have sufficed to generate a moving and dramatically compelling story.

Nor is Merida just a spoiled, egoistic brat. Twice she saves Elinor's life, once by tipping Mom off about toxic berries, and a second time by showing her elder how to catch food in the wilderness. Without such advice and demonstration, Elinor would have died from poison or starvation. Both equally fatal. If the queen is brave to rescue her daughter's bow from the flames, Merida's a match for her, interposing herself between deluded father and perceived enemy Mordu. The bruin Fergus threatens at that critical moment is simply Elinor's Mama Bear. Merida's desperate intervention could have ended her own life. This isn't a portrayal of courage?

Looking at technical prowess on display, BRAVE is clearly the work of gifted animation talents and a remarkably fluid camera that mixes upward angle shots, arresting overheads, thrillingly kinetic trackings, and sometimes terrifying closeups to optimal effect.

Unfortunately, sound engineers overplay their skills, resulting too often in murky sound and lost or smeary vocals. If subtitles are removed, a considerable amount of dialogue is lost. Colorful regional accents are not a fair offset for indistinct speech.

Lighting is also frequently marginal. Indoor scenes of candle or torch illumination are challenging under any circumstances. But in an era of nearly unlimited resources for optical clarity, hazy nocturnal scenes are simply unacceptable. Why spend thousands of dollars on props and models and then leave them ill-defined due to minimal highlighting? This is senseless and wasteful.

Rousing Celtic music by Patrick Doyle is subverted by infusions of contemporary pop. These destroy the illusion of a medieval setting, sabotaging the art department's faithful recreation of ancient physical furnishings. Since substantial research had unearthed fascinating pre-Roman designs, subsequently incorporated into castle and megalith décor, why war upon them with current musical fashions extraordinarily inappropriate?

Tempestuous editing propels plot along in thrilling fashion. Would it were free of intrusions from low humor and repetitious donnybrooks.

BRAVE is worthy viewing for young audiences mature enough to discard trivialities of magic and focus instead on human dignity, compassion, and tolerance of opposing viewpoints. This translates into suitable fare for ages ten and older. It is not appropriate for less experienced youngsters. Some of the humor is wretchedly offensive. So be warned, parents. And the nasty, greedy trio of Hamish, Hubert, and Harris, Merida's three kid brothers, is neither amusing nor in any way exemplary.

Special features on the dvd are an audio commentary, the uninspired 2012 seven-minute short animation directed by Brian Larsen titled THE LEGEND OF MORDU, a better 2011 seven-minute fantasy animation directed by Enrico Casarosa called LA LUNA, subtitles, and scene selections.

BRAVE is better than some commentators would lead you to believe. But it falls far short of Pixar's masterpieces.