



KUBO AND THE TWO STRINGS is a Fourth Quarter 2018 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. What follows is Kino Ken's review of that Universal Pictures Home Entertainment dvd release.

17 of a possible 20 points

******1/2 of a possible ******

**United States 2016 color 101 minutes feature animation musical fantasy
Laika Studio / Two Strings LLC / Focus Features Producers: Travis Knight,
Arianne Sutner**

**Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or vocal performance
(j) designates a juvenile performer**

Points:

2 Direction: Travis Knight

1 Editing: Christopher Murrie

2 Cinematography: Frank Passingham*

1 Lighting: James Wilder Hancock, Torrance Tornberg

**1 Screenplay: Marc Haines and Chris Butler, from a story by
Shannon Tindle and Marc Haines**

**Animation: Daniel Alderson, Sean Burns, Thiago Calçado, Jeff Croke,
Charles Greenfield, Travis Knight, Danail Kraev,**

**Malcolm Lamont, Adam Lawthers, Matias Liebrecht,
Tingting Liu, Brian McLean, Suzy Parr, Kevin Parry,
Florian Perinelle, Zachary Rahman, Justin Rasch,
Baptiste Rogron, Brad Schiff, Anthony Straus,
Carolyn Vale, David Vandervoort**

2 Art Department Coordination: Casey Zander Anderson*

Concept Design: August Hall*

Graphic Design: Josh Holtsclaw*

Set Design: Carl Hamilton*

Character Design: Shannon Tindle*

Music Supervision: Maggie Rodford, Sara Matarazzo

Music Editing: Dominick Certo

Music Recording and Mixing: Nick Wollage

2 Music: Dario Marianelli*

Costume Design: Deborah Cook*

Japanese Consultant: Taro Goto

2 Sound Editing Supervision / Sound Design: Tim Chau

Sound Editing: Clayton Weber

**Sound Effects: Gregg Barbanelli, Catherine Harper, Darrin Mann,
Travis Crotts**

Dialogue Recording: Dominic Boucher

Re-recording / Remixing: Tim Chau, Tim LeBlanc

Casting: Allison Jones

2 Vocal Acting

2 Creativity

17 total points

**Vocal Cast: Art Parkinson (j)* (Kubo), Charlize Theron* (Monkey /
Kubo's Mom,), Ralph Fiennes (Moon King / Kubo's Grandfather),
George Takei (Hosato, a grandfather), Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa (Hashi),
Brenda Vaccaro (Kameyo, old woman merchant), Rooney Mara*
(The Sisters), Matthew McConaughey (Beetle / Hanzo, Kubo's Dad),
Meyrick Murphy (Mari), Minae Noji (Minae), Alpha Takahashi (Aiko),
Laura Miro (Miho), Ken Takemoto (Ken), Aaron Aoki, Luke Donaldson,
Michael Sun Lee, Cary Mizobe, Rachel Morihiko, Thomas Isao Morinaka,**

**Saemi Nakamura, Zachary Alexander Rice, Mariel Sheets (j),
Wassim Hawat (Villagers)**

An independent American feature animation that is neither a sequel to, nor copy of, current mainstream releases, KUBO AND THE TWO STRINGS employs Japanese setting and characters to deal with core issues of life, death, free will, and family. At its center is a traditional hero quest, complete with triads of Fury-like sisters, tasks for novice adventurer to perform, and face-offs between protagonist and antagonists. Additionally, quester Kubo's part of a small nuclear family of three members.

Sidestepping constrictive adherence to either Buddhist or Shinto creeds, filmmakers introduce elements of both religions into the narrative. This gives an unusual spiritual foundation to its story.

Kubo, a boy of perhaps eleven years of age, lives in exile from his father's home territory and extended family. He has two vindictive aunts bent on punishing a disobedient sister through removing the lad's remaining eye, thus completing a task begun by Kubo's blind grandfather, the moon god.

Unable to complete assaults on infant grandson and shielding rebel daughter, a disgruntled maternal patriarch settles for half measures. Loyal remaining twins magically transform Kubo's mortal warrior father Hanzo into a rhinoceros beetle afflicted by amnesia, a form of mental blindness.

The Moon God himself leaves Kubo deprived of left eye.

Nor does the baby's mother escape unscathed, hitting her head on a submerged rock while a boat serving as escape transport tumbles amid tumultuous ocean waves. This leaves the adult refugee with aftereffects of a concussion which scramble her memory and sap daylight energy.

An unspecified number of years pass during which somehow mama and child survive in a cliff-top cave overlooking the sea.

At some point during that lapse of time Kubo becomes village storyteller, passing along a never-ending tale told him by Mother to an enthusiastic daily crowd. As his source never reveals a conclusion to the storyteller, invariably audiences are similarly left cheated. Notwithstanding repeated disappointment, a few coins are always delivered to the entertainer, sufficient to purchase essential food for two.

Meanwhile, a ritual develops. Kubo uniquely spices narration with reenactment by means of origami characters. In return, the community applauds, adding interjections and answering posers from the narrator to further enliven proceedings.

Each night, weary traveler returns to darkening shelter, there kindling a cooking fire and gently preparing former guardian for supper. In spite of failing recollections, Kubo's nocturnal companion reminds him over and over to always come back home before the sun sets. Otherwise, he will be at the mercy of her malevolent sisters. Only a special monkey charm carried always in his backpack can frustrate their destructiveness.

One day, at the Obon festival, this advice goes unheeded. Becoming engrossed in attempts to open dialogue with presumably deceased dad Hanzo, whose spirit should then be free to roam, Kubo overstays daylight at the cemetery. All efforts to contact Dad fail. What does develop is approaching danger. Just after disgusted suppliant informs unresponsive air he doesn't need a father anyway, two witchlike females, burning vegetation as they advance, locate their panicky, long-missing nephew through assisting twilight. They start calling his name. How do those strangers know it? Kubo is momentarily stunned. Only resort to "Mr." Monkey saves that unheroic coward from falling victim to familial vengefulness. Sensing imminent menace, Hanzo's wife dashes into action, arriving at what promises to be an abduction site to stave off powers of darkness. She informs her son he must find armor of his father to stay alive. Then, seizing the youthful musician's shamisen, she strums mightily upon it.

That triggers abundant outpouring of magic. Intended victim receives wings, permitting aerial flight from battleground and temporary delivery.

Losing consciousness, the inexperienced flyer awakens in a distant winterscape called the Farlands, where a lifeless talisman from his pack incarnates as snow monkey. Most fitting, as macaques are primarily active at night, much like a certain family previously mentioned.

Under "tough love" tutelage of caustic, critical Monkey, apprentice explorer learns his next set of tasks is to recover three emblems of samurai prestige: sword unbreakable, breastplate impenetrable, and helmet invulnerable. These will ultimately save his life. All three had formerly belonged to Hanzo. The boy will have to reunite these disconnected threads of family existence.

Riding bareback on provident primate, Kubo is rapidly carried over snowy terrain which stretches outward to the horizon.

Nightfall forces a halt to travel. Monkey selects a whale carcass for makeshift inn. During discussion over dinner, she confesses to ignorance of where Hanzo's armor is currently located.

Kubo pulls out a strand of his mother's hair accidentally plucked during confrontation with malicious relatives. Convinced sentimental messmate she will give it back, Monkey takes his cherished souvenir into her paws and creates an amamori wristband to retain maternal memory. Wearing it will ward off evil, reminding wearer of his mama's self-sacrifice.

Next day's journey finds biped in playful mood. His overnight dreams had manufactured a miniature paper Hanzo, whose tiny sword now led the way forward. Reveling in creative freedom, shamisen player magically strums up a flock of origami birds, which get out of hand when mischievous wish converts them into stinging mosquitos. Told in no uncertain terms power must be disciplined, the guilty party nonetheless continues to practice heedlessness, little suspecting another set of eyes is observing Boy and Monkey as they pick their way over bumpy mounds revealing various items of gigantic armament half-buried in snow.

Without warning, a carefree balancer vanishes from Monkey's view into gaping eye socket of enormous skull. When she follows suit, his counselor discovers a huge beetle has kidnapped her charge. He's inspired to do so by catching sight of mini-Hanzo.

It seems the huge talking beetle has been spellbound by agents unknown. He dimly recollects being a formidable samurai warrior and then demonstrates uncanny talent for precision archery. After pledging loyalty to their agenda, Beetle's allowed to join the original twosome, converting it into a trio of frequently bickering investigators.

Further exploits follow, involving a sixteen-foot tall towering youkai skeleton topped by a skull loaded with swords – one of which happens to be infrangible – and struggle against underwater polyp-like extensions from a monster. Each of these contain an eye in which are reflected enticing dreams or memories which could eternally entrap viewers. Kubo eventually escapes its clutches, though not before grasping through revelation in the Garden of Dreams that Monkey is actually Mother. Soon thereafter, Kubo and companions are beset by an attack

from the sky. Sorceress sisters have once again pinpointed them successfully, this time through helpful mists. They hope to finish what was begun years earlier when one of their number, sent Earthward by the Moon God to lethally dispose of Hanzo before he could lay hands on impregnable armor, instead fell in love with prey and married him.

Their offspring was Kubo. Though disfigured, he yet lived on as a mortal. The unlawful child of such a tainted marital union must be totally blinded and brought back to Sky World, an outcome only made possible by first killing obstructive parents. Can the two malefactors manage their assignment better this second time?

Later in the film, its central figure is offered the opportunity to receive eternal life in return for what amounts to acceptance of blind faith and emotionless perfection. This presents a contradiction, since absence of vision cannot be regarded by Kubo as any sort of flawlessness. Possibly grasping implications Grandfather missed, Grandson spurns that deal. He's confident love and friendship are of greater value than isolated detachment, a rejection simultaneously of Buddhist precepts.

Parental actions prove the point. It's only fair they be rewarded by reciprocated loyalty to them. Ultimately he will have to guard Hanzo and Mother through perpetual remembrances, even if that should compel benevolent lying to ensure harmony with an even older supernatural generation.

Difficult themes here for juveniles to absorb. Even adult critics balk at them, preferring to dismiss the film as lacking in characterization or motives. Neither assertion is true.

Grandfather wants Grandson to bear allegiance and resemblance to him, not comprehending sightlessness or complete indifference to suffering and affection are deficiencies. He changes arguments during debate with Kubo only to cajole him into acquiescence. Not because his end aims have altered.

Kubo, for his part, doesn't waver in determination to retrieve and reconnect severed bonds uniting him with parental love and care. It's the main goal he's interested in achieving. A secondary, practical necessity is uncovering what relationship exists between himself and three persecutors. Like Oedipus, he must learn and absorb Truth unflinchingly. That's an essential, inescapable ingredient of maturation.

Boasting unfamiliar, impeccably designed sets and props, **KUBO AND THE TWO STRINGS** also showcases a gorgeously lyrical music score from composer Dario Marianelli.

Banter between Monkey and Beetle indicate conflicting philosophies and personalities subordinated to mutual love of child.

Monkey's summarizing speech to Kubo rings true. "We grow stronger, the world grows more dangerous. Life has a funny way of keeping things in balance."

There's more here than witty bon mots of little or no practical substance.

Where scripting goes wrong occasionally is in not fleshing out characters of a divine duo intent on hellish deeds. Dark angels indeed in action. Their origins should have been delineated explicitly and motives elaborated fully. Then audiences could better understand why they act like demons rather than divine emissaries. After all, they are daughters of the Moon God himself. The seductively voiced twosome should be exemplars of tolerance and peace. Not avenging comprachicos from the sky.

Masterful use is made of silences. These convey movingly the unspoken love people in Kubo's immediate family feel for one another and are represented best by scenes of Kubo and his mother in their cave together after darkness falls.

Illumination does not run always to sparkling brightness in this production. Why should it, when somberness is desirable in scenes highlighting the gravity of stakes in Kubo's quest? Failure means complete, irretrievable loss of identity and mortal extinction. Thus fogs bring valid mystery to bear, without suggesting inadequacy on the part of lighting technicians. Dimness only becomes irksome in certain travelling shots where there's no thematic reason for murk.

Critical to the motion picture's effectiveness is excellence in sound recording and handling of fluctuations in dynamics to achieve maximum dovetailing of ambience and sound. Neither excessively noisy nor irritatingly muttering, the soundtrack does well what it sets out to execute, adding transparency to speeches without overriding or masking sounds of nature.

Vocal performances are delightfully individualized, with Ralph Fiennes's Janusian alternations of cajolery and threat, Rooney Mara's sinister whispering suggestiveness, and Charlize Theron's wide-ranging assortment of imperatives, confidences, and quibbles being most memorable.

Astonishing best describes animation of puppets here, their spectrum of facial expression and suppleness of gesture conferring another layer of realism on what is depicted. According to director Travis Knight, the optical printer device can generate forty-eight million facial expressions, all different. Brow and mouth can be printed separately, increasing options beyond even that number. A sock puppet foundation for Monkey, combine with Kubo's internal steel armature overhung by plastic paper under silk cover and floral wire finger armatures for each miniature actor to render unnervingly human appearances to physical performers.

Add to that the often epic scope of Frank Passingham's camera shots, these apparently unhindered by sheer multitude of sets involved. Since puppets can be pivoted with relative ease, shots of them can be designed for almost any angle, making for plenty of contrast and variability.

Artisans working in the costuming field should be commended for precise fidelity to Japanese traditional garb. Still, the critique of too many distinct historical periods being displayed is valid. It would have been better to choose one and stick to it throughout, since Kubo's actions transpire in mortal time, not in vague timelessness.

Children below the age of ten are not advisable viewers for KUBO AND THE TWO STRINGS. Themes, violence, numerous mute stretches, and requisite inferences of undeclared motives make Travis Knight's metaphysical drama overly challenging for preadolescents unaccustomed to dealing with subtexts.

Bonus features on this Universal Studios Home Entertainment dvd include a "Corners of the Earth" featurette running 3½ minutes, which serves as an introductory overview to the film, an incisively cogent audio commentary by the director, a featurette of 2½-minute duration titled "The Myth of Kubo" dealing with sources for story plot, and a "Japanese Inspiration" featurette relating connections between Japanese customs and the original story drama related in KUBO AND THE TWO STRINGS. "Japanese Inspiration" has a runtime of approximately six minutes.

Don't pass up a chance to see this outstanding representative of contemporary American feature animation, which is also a passionate ode to family cohesiveness. It can, and should, be borrowed from the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church in Ligonier. See for

yourself why critics have found this unique tale of discovered identity and family cohesion so compelling.