

Frozen

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Rogerebert.com, Nov. 27, 2013

- ¹ "Frozen," the latest Disney musical extravaganza, preaches the importance of embracing your true nature but seems to be at odds with itself.
- ² The animated, 3-D adventure wants to enliven and subvert the conventions of typical Disney princess movies while simultaneously remaining true to their aesthetic trappings for maximum merchandising potential. It encourages young women to support and stay loyal to each other—a crucial message when mean girls seem so prevalent—as long as some hunky potential suitors and adorable, wise-cracking creatures also are around to complete them.
- ³ It all seems so cynical, this attempt to shake things up without shaking them up too much. "Frozen" just happens to be reaching theaters as Thanksgiving and the holiday shopping season are arriving. The marketing possibilities are mind-boggling. And in the tradition of the superior "Beauty and the Beast" and "The Little Mermaid," surely "Frozen: The Musical" will be headed to the Broadway stage soon. The songs – which are lively and amusing if not quite instant hits—are already in place.
- ⁴ Little girls will absolutely love it, though. That much is undeniable. And the film from co-directors Chris Buck ("Surf's Up") and Jennifer Lee is never less than gorgeous to watch. A majestic mountaintop ice castle is particularly exquisite—glittery and detailed and tactile, especially as rendered in 3-D.
- ⁵ But first we must witness the tortured backstory of the film's princesses – not one, but two of them. The script from "Wreck-It Ralph" co-writer Lee, inspired by the Hans Christian Andersen story "The Snow Queen," has lots of cheeky, contemporary touches but is firmly and safely rooted in Scandinavian fairy tale traditions.
- ⁶ When they were young girls, sisters Anna and Elsa were joyous playmates and inseparable friends. But Elsa's special power—her ability to turn anything to ice and snow in a flash from her fingertips—comes back to haunt her when she accidentally zaps her sister. (Not unlike the telekinesis in "Carrie," Elsa inadvertently unleashes her power in moments of heightened emotion.) A magical troll king heals Anna and erases the event from her memory, but as for the sisters' relationship, the damage is done.
- ⁷ Elsa's parents lock her away and close down the castle, which devastates the younger Anna. (Of the many tunes from "Avenue Q" and "The Book of Mormon" songwriter Robert Lopez and his wife, Kristen Anderson-Lopez, the wistful "Do You Want to Build a Snowman?" is by far the most poignant.) But once they reach adolescence and it's Elsa's turn to take over the throne at age 18, the two experience an awkward reunion.
- ⁸ The perky, quirky Anna (now voiced by a likable Kristen Bell) is a little nervous but overjoyed to see her sister. The reserved and reluctant Elsa (Broadway veteran Idina Menzel) remains distant, and with gloved hands hopes not to freeze anything and reveal her true self on coronation day. But a run-in with an amorous, visiting prince (Santino Fontana) who sets his sights on Anna triggers Elsa's ire, and she inadvertently plunges the sunny, idyllic kingdom into perpetual winter.

- ⁹ Flustered and fearful, Elsa dashes away in a fit of self-imposed exile – which significantly weakens "Frozen," since she's the film's most complicated and compelling figure. On her way to the highest mountain she can find, Elsa belts out the power ballad "Let It Go," her version of "I Am Woman." This soaring declaration of independence is the reason you want a performer of Menzel's caliber in this role, and it's the film's musical highlight. (Her flashy physical transformation from prim princess to ice queen does make her resemble a real housewife of some sort, however.)
- ¹⁰ Afterward, though, the story settles in on Anna's efforts to retrieve her sister and restore order to the kingdom. While the journey may seem overly familiar, the destination has some surprises in store. Some come out of nowhere and don't exactly work. But the biggie—the one that's a real game-changer in terms of the sorts of messages Disney animated classics have sent for decades—is the one that's important not just for the little girls in the audience, but for all viewers. It's so innovative, it makes you wish everything about the film met the same clever standard.

Frozen

James Kendrick

Film Desk Reviews, Nov. 2013

- ¹ Disney's *Frozen* is an immensely enjoyable, surprisingly invigorating marriage of the old and the new. It returns to the late-'80s/early '90s Alan Menken/Howard Ashman Broadway musical style that rejuvenated the animation division with *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) while also fully embracing the vast visual possibilities of computer-generated animation, whose ability to render glistening vistas of sun-dappled snow, weirdly refracting walls of ice, and the intricacies of the most delicate of snow flakes makes the idea of the film being done any other way almost unthinkable. Since the merging of Disney and Pixar in 2006, the Disney-branded computer-animated films have gotten better and better, moving far beyond the forced silliness of *Chicken Little* (2005) as they hit their stride with *Tangled* (2010), a humorous spin on the Rapunzel fairy tale, and reached a comedic and nostalgic high note last year with *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012). *Frozen*, which not surprisingly was written and produced by the minds behind *Tangled* and *Wreck-It Ralph*, is another step forward.
- ² Based ever-so-loosely on a few snippets of ideas in Hans Christian Anderson's 1845 fairy tale "The Snow Queen," *Frozen* is set in the fictional Nordic country of Arendelle. We are introduced to two royal sisters, Anna and Elsa, the latter of whom possesses magical powers that allow her to freeze anything she touches and to produce snow and ice out of thin air. It's a wonderful gift to have when you want to go sledding in the middle of the summer, but it is also a potential danger, which we see when Elsa accidentally hits Anna with one of her blasts of power. As a result, their parents insist that Elsa keep to herself and hide her powers while Anna's memory of the incident and her sister's abilities are wiped away with the help of a group of friendly trolls.
- ³ Years later, after their parents are tragically killed in a storm, Anna (Kristen Bell) and Elsa (Idina Menzel) are now young adults, and Elsa, the eldest of the two, is to be officially coroneted queen. Spunky Anna, who is tired of being locked away alone inside the castle, can't wait for the ceremonies and all the people it will bring, while Elsa, weighed down with the burden of keeping

her abilities a secret, dreads the event. When Anna meets and instantly falls in love with Hans (Santino Fontana), a prince from a neighboring country, and agrees to marry him, Elsa's emotional response betrays her and her powers come flooding out, frightening everyone (including her).

- ⁴ Not knowing what else to do, she runs off into the mountains and builds herself an ice fortress in which she can remain alone, inadvertently leaving Arendelle paralyzed in a state of constant winter. Anna, being the plucky would-be heroine that she is, decides to find Elsa herself and convince her to turn off the cold, a journey that requires her to team with Kristoff (Jonathan Groff), an earnest young ice hauler who has spent most of his life with his emotive reindeer, Sven.
- ⁵ Scripted by Jennifer Lee (*Wreck-It Ralph*) and directed by Lee and Chris Buck (*Tangled*), *Frozen* dangles a lot of fairy tale clichés and familiar plot lines in front of us, but primarily as distraction from what the filmmakers are really up to. While it is technically a “princess movie” in the vein of *Cinderella* (1950) and *The Little Mermaid*, the story's fixation on love and its role as the ultimate redeemer is not limited to romantic affection. Quite the contrary, if anything *Frozen* plays as a none-too-subtle cautionary tale about *amour* of the first sight variety, emphasizing instead the idea that true love grows out of time and interaction. As it turns out, romantic love is not the engine that drives the story; rather, it is Anna's love for her sister and Elsa's tortured need to protect those around her by walling herself off, literally and figuratively. The story is, at heart, about filial love, as the bond between sisters—once all powerful, then broken, then slowly reassembled—gives the film its heart and its mind. While not quite a feminist wrecking of antiquated Disney gender roles, *Frozen* does offer a pliable middle ground in which its female characters are given voice and agency and something to do other than swoon over a man, but without completely discounting the power of and desire for romantic attraction.