

Cuddly animated 'Panda' masters the Kung Fu action movies

Contributed by Tim Riley
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Kung Fu PANDA (Rated PG)

Who doesn't love a cuddly, soft panda, the world's cutest animal and the best thing to come out of China since stir-fried noodles?

Ironically, the lovable panda that stars in the animated 'Kung Fu Panda' is a clumsy lug working in the family's noodle shop. Incongruous as it may seem, animation doesn't capture the essentially adorable and outwardly sweet-natured appearance of the giant pandas on display at the National Zoo ever since President Nixon made his historic 1972 trip to China. On the other hand, only a cartoon could give a giant panda the dexterity to become a master of martial arts.

Alternating between comedic elements and Jackie Chan-style action heroics, 'Kung Fu Panda' is the story of a plump, drowsy, huggable black-and-white bear with a huge pot belly who has only one aspiration in life, namely to become an expert in a martial art that relies on agility, mental prowess and lightning-fast reflexes.

The clumsy bear is named Po (voiced by Jack Black), a waiter at his father's noodle diner who displays none of the inherent abilities to become a Kung Fu master. And yet nothing will dissuade him from the foolish quest, not even his father, a goose named Mr. Ping (voiced by James Hong).

Eager to quit slinging noodle bowls, Po heads off to a public ceremony at an ancient temple where grand master Oogway the Turtle (Randall Duk Kim), acting upon prophecy, will anoint the new Dragon Warrior. This selection will have great consequence for the inhabitants in the mountainous Chinese village that is otherwise vulnerable to attack from hostile forces.

It is widely expected that the appointment of the Dragon Warrior will go to one of the members of the legendary Furious Five: Tigress (Angelina Jolie), Crane (David Cross), Mantis (Seth Rogen), Viper (Lucy Liu) and Monkey (Jackie Chan). All of these Kung Fu artists have been trained by the wily wolf Master Shifu (Dustin Hoffman). Literally stumbling upon the scene, Po drops in on the ceremony so unexpectedly that Oogway proclaims that the lovable panda is the new Dragon Warrior.

This turn of events does not sit well with the Furious Five, or with Master Shifu, who thinks Po is irredeemably incapable of being properly trained, if only because the panda is obscenely overweight and lacking any athletic skills. What Po lacks in ability, he more than makes up for in optimism and enthusiasm. And so the giant panda participates in a rigorous training program that is often very comical, because as expected Po is uncoordinated and maladroit.

Master Shifu's lessons, which will lead eventually to obtaining the powerful knowledge from the secret Dragon Scroll, take on a greater sense of urgency when the vicious snow leopard Tai Lung (Ian MacShane) escapes from the heavily-fortified and well-guarded prison where he has been chained up for years. With revenge on his mind for having been denied what he presumed was his rightful place as the Dragon Warrior, Tai Lung is set to wreak havoc on Po's isolated village.

For the final third of its run, 'Kung Fu Panda' lurches quickly from the comedic tone to the full-bore action that requires much hand-to-hand combat. A furious battle erupts when the Furious Five confront Tai Lung on a precarious rope bridge over a deep ravine. This is the run-up to the showdown between the suddenly energized Po and the determined Tai Lung.

Chinese art and architecture lend themselves to a very colorful rendition in computer-generated animation. 'Kung Fu Panda' realizes the essential beauty of the Chinese culture with masterful precision. This is a good-looking film where the visuals come off much better than the script. A younger audience is more likely to be impressed with the decent story and its actors that are easily outdone by the film's splashy art.

DVD RELEASE UPDATE

It seems only fitting to note the recent release of a DVD double feature about one of nature's most amazing creatures. 'A Panda is Born' and 'Baby Panda's First Year' capture the essence of how the Giant Panda's survival depends on the successful reproduction of each member of the species, given that an estimated 1,600 pandas live in the wild.

'A Panda is Born' follows the panda mating at the National Zoo as the female, Mei Xiang, and her mate, Tian Tian, finally succeed, resulting in the ultimate delight of a Panda birth. The companion piece, 'Baby Panda's First Year' follows baby Tai Shan's life at the Giant Panda Habitat at the National Zoo, and viewers get to marvel at the instincts of first time mother Mei Xiang.

This DVD double feature proves an earlier point that a real live panda is much cuter than the animated version in 'Kung Fu Panda'.

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