The Secret of Kells (DVD)

Talent: Brendan Gleeson, Evan McGuire, Mick Lally, Christen Mooney, Michael McGrath.

Date of review: Thursday 8th April, 2010

Director: Thom Moore
Duration: 74 minutes
Classification: PG
We rate it: 5 stars.

For someone with a passion for the cinema, it is a true delight to occasionally be able to say “You must try to see this film – it is remarkable, it is extraordinary.” I have been able to say this about The Secret of Kells, and, like the saying of it, the viewing of the film itself has filled me with pleasure.

One thing we have had no shortage of recently is animated films. With the continuing advances in CGI and the near-perfection of 3D projection technologies, studios have been bankrolling more and more animated movies, 3D and otherwise, in order to get a slice of that biggest of all film markets: the school-holiday crowd. Kids do love animated films, and when savvy studios like Pixar and Dreamworks are able to produce movies that adults will get as much out of as children, the big bucks really start to flow through the cineplexes. It’s not all cynical money-making, though; it would be false to suggest that there isn’t a great deal of artistry on display in many of the recent animated films to have hit the cinema screen. Witness: The Secret of Kells.

In many ways, The Secret of Kells is an unusual artefact: it is a French-Irish co-production that is as much Celtic history-lesson as it is child’s (or adult’s) piece of entertainment; it is as much about the act of storytelling itself as it is an astonishingly beautiful piece of storytelling, and it is as perfectly-realised a piece of visual art as many a painting or sculpture. With all of this in mind it is perhaps the most staggeringly beautiful animated film that this reviewer has ever had the honour to see.

Set in mediaeval Britain, The Secret of Kells centres around Brendan, a young novice who lives inside a walled village that is under threat from the ‘invaders from the North’. Brendan’s Uncle (voiced by the wonderful Irish actor Brendan Gleeson) is the Abbot of the village Church, and the prime motivator behind the village’s fortification, and is a stern presence in Brendan’s life. Brendan wants to explore the world around him, which he sees as filled with wonder, while his Uncle wants him to...
contribute to the town’s safety by staying within the walls and helping to preserve the written treasures kept by the Church. Into this complicated relationship come two figures from outside the village: Brother Aidan, a renowned illuminator of manuscripts and the protector of a most valuable artefact, and Aisling, a girl of the forest who charms the young Brendan. The film tells the story of Brendan’s relationships with these two figures, and along the way it describes one possible origin for one of the most famous books in the history of humankind.

The Secret of Kells doesn’t just tell a beautiful and humane story, filled with magic and touching emotion, it also takes its viewers on the most astonishing visual and aural journey one could imagine. The hand-drawn animation is dream-like, soaring through Brendan’s mind and feelings as he does something as simple as walk from his cloister to the forest; we see things from the points-of-view of innumerable characters, animals and other, more difficult-to-define vantages; we hear the glorious, lilting tones of Bruno Coulais’ musical score as the visuals whisk us along on the hypnotic journey the filmmakers have invited us to take. Clearly inspired by the style of illustration that fills the Book of Kells – the real-life manuscript at the centre of the story – the animators have conjured up an uniquely gorgeous visual style that is as recognisable as it is dream-like, as grounded as it is magical.

It may indeed sound like I’m raving, and I suppose that’s true; yet I think raving is warranted when one is in the presence of something as moving and as perfectly realised as this film. As I suggested at the beginning of this review, this may be the most beautiful animated film I have ever seen. See The Secret of Kells and you may well agree with me.

Nick Prescott