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Strange World (2022) | Review

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A step forward or a step back?

By Emma Chen

Strange World (2022) is the latest Disney release and I was eager to watch it, as it was predicted to be one of the biggest flops in the history of Disney movies, as well as the first film with a main character openly part of the LGBTQ+ community. The story focuses on the conflicts of three generations of the Clade family in the town of Avalonia: the stubborn explorer Jaeger Clade, his farmer son Searcher and his grandson Ethan. When the production of a plant that gives energy to the whole town is at risk, the family embarks on a journey to save it, in which they'll find themselves in a 'strange world' that will challenge their views on the world as they know it.



Courtesy of IMDb

The style used for Avalonia and Searcher's farm reminded me of the '50s sci-fi classics with a particular homage to Jules Verne's stories, with warm colours that give a sense of family and nostalgia in contrast with the cold tones and neon lights used to describe the 'strange world' and the creatures in it.
The narrative structure and the setting—a farm and an isolated town surrounded by mountains and mystery—are classics of the Disney brand, yet the catch on the public is not the same as it would have been ten or twenty years ago. An external reason may be the general change in interests, leaning toward Marvel-esque frantic stories over a tale of a teenager finding his identity and discussing with his father.

Nevertheless, while the movie has some promising ideas and the narrative arc works, something is missing. It is not as funny as older Disney movies, original or innovative in terms of plot, and not as emotionally engaging.
I can't help but compare it to previous works from its director Donald Lee Hall, such as *Big Hero 6*, *Oceania* or *Raya and the Last Dragon*, and I don't witness the same intensity and attention to detail. The result is a modest story that touches on a few critical themes like generational conflicts and the importance of finding our own passion, but only in a superficial way.

However, the elephant in the room is Disney's effort to create an inclusive movie in which everyone could feel represented, and to do so without making it feel forced. Starting from Ethan, an interracial couple's son, who has a crush on his male friend Diazo, and ending with the mixed cast and the family's dog Legend with three legs, it is clear that *Strange World* is a big step forward in terms of inclusivity for the brand, particularly because none of these character choices influences the plot. There is not a single comment about Ethan's sexuality, not even when he tells his old-fashioned grandfather about Diazo, and the response is simply a piece of weird but warm-hearted love advice. Such innovative choices stand out even more in the traditional setting of the movie, creating a standard that should be an example for future releases. Maybe one day we'll obtain a Disney classic that is inclusive and charming at the same time.

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