

Lauraann Wood

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Cars 2 could sure use a tuneup

Disney and Pixar can put yet another genuinely life-like animation in the record books with their latest movie, "Cars 2." The film's bold colors and charming characters made the bodywork shiny and presentable, but the story, or stories, behind it all could have used a little more work under the hood.

The film begins with British spy Finn McMissile (Micael Caine) boat hopping his way to a secluded oil platform where he overhears the malicious Professor Zündapp (Thomas Kretschmann) plotting something that he can't quite piece together, as he gets caught and forced to escape the secret meeting without being blown to pieces.

Back in Radiator Springs, however, it's good to be home for the four-time Piston cup winner Lightning McQueen (Owen Wilson). The feeling isn't too permanent, though, after McQueen's best friend Tow Mater (Larry the Cable Guy) phones into a televised interview with alternative fuel big shot Sir Miles Axlerod (Eddie Izzard) of Allinol fuel and Italian racer Francesco Bernoulli (John Turturro) to assure his pal's superiority. When he takes the phone and interjects on the conversation, Francesco challenges McQueen to a first-ever World Grand Prix, a three-part race held in Japan, England and Italy, to decide the roadway ruler once and for all.

Not only does McQueen accept the challenge, but he also takes his instigating friend along for the ride.

It would have been Pixar's golden ticket to a solid sequel had they stuck with that plot throughout the movie's entirety. Instead, directors John Lasseter and Brad Lewis switched lanes and took a different route when Mater's untimely bathroom break in Japan puts him in the middle of some spy car combat, and the rest of the movie flip-flops between McQueen's mildly exhilarating competition and Mater's exciting escapade as a mistaken American spy that's used to help solve the mystery of the alternative fuel saboteurs.

With high-speed car chases, gunplay and explosions, "Cars 2" was definitely Mater's movie just as "Cars" was McQueen's. Mater's storyline seemed a little too dense for children to follow, but it allowed for wonderful action sequences that would easily hold their attention. It's almost as though the tow truck's plot was Pixar's salute to the parents who bothered to sit through the film with their children, who also had plenty of opportunities to cheer on their favorite red racecar.

Pixar has a good reputation for creating worlds inhabited and dominated by inanimate objects, and this movie is no exception. Their turning the great London landmark into "Big Bentley" and decorating scenes with "cargoyles" and release previews for such movies as "The Incredimobiles" gave viewers something to anticipate and applaud with every scene, as though Pixar used this movie to flaunt just how good they are at what they do.

Unfortunately, though, the beautiful shots and creative re-imaginings are pretty much the extent of this movie's worth. Perhaps it would have worked if Lasseter thought to release this sequel a bit sooner or stray away from the crazy international espionage subplot. But if that's all the story they could come up with for a sequel that had five years to turn into something just as classic as its predecessor, then here's hoping they don't try coming up with any more.

Pixar made a smart move by shifting the "hero" of the movie from McQueen to the buck-toothed and airheaded tow truck. But the clueless "Materisms" that everyone loved in the first movie become tiresome and redundant as scene after scene shows Mater missing yet another joke or mistaking something for what it's not. For those who remember watching "Cars" and wishing there was more Mater to point and laugh at, consider that wish granted in full as long that's the only thing you wanted out of a second movie.

Valuable life lessons aren't missing in this film, as McQueen acknowledges his pal's flaws and tells him to be proud of who he is without any worry of how others view him. This "be yourself" message comes right before it's too late, but all is forgiven and Mater summons his newfound strength to bust out of his bondage, solve the mystery and save the day. Everyone walks out of the theater satisfied, but not overjoyed.

But if there's one lesson Pixar may have not meant to imply in their latest creation but should definitely have picked up on, it's that no one should try to fix anything that's not broken.