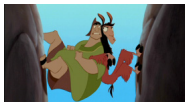


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## ***THE EMPEROR'S NEW GROOVE***

Despite being saddled with a crummy title, Disney's *The Emperor's New Groove* turns out to be the studio's most sheerly pleasurable animated feature in ages. It appears to have been made not only for those of us who were sick to death of the tired old Disney formula, but by people who were sick to death of the tired old Disney formula; it attacks the studio's shopworn clichés with a vengeance that is both hilarious and utterly deserved.

The animation departments at 20th Century Fox and DreamWorks must be kicking themselves. They get middling-to-worse responses for such features as *Anastasia*, *The Prince of Egypt*, and *The*

*Road to El Dorado*

, all of which copied the Disney style slavishly, when they could've gone the opposite route – by turning the formula on its ear – and come up with something as rambunctious and wholly enjoyable as

*The Emperor's New Groove*

. Disney has beaten the other studios to the punch yet again.

At the start, the film only hints at how good it'll be. We are introduced to Kuzco (voiced by David

## The Perils – and Pleasures – of Self-Involvement: "The Emperor's New Groove" and "What Women Want"

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Spade), a Peruvian monarch almost too stupid and self-involved for this world. At least that's what his chief advisor, Yzma (Eartha Kitt), thinks; with the aid of her muscle-bound-lummock assistant, Kronk (Patrick Warburton), she plans to poison Kuzco and take control of the empire after his death. But the potion intended to kill him merely turns him into a talking llama instead; he is thrown into the jungle miles from home, and has to rely on the help of two kind-hearted townsfolk, Pacha (John Goodman) and Chicha (Wendie Malick), to return him to the palace and his human body.

This being a Disney flick, that means Kuzco will have to learn to be less selfish and trust in others, and when the plot hits this juncture, you might feel a slight throbbing in your temple; uh-oh, here come those predictable Disney signposts to ruin your good time. (Must we sit through another treacherous journey home with Important Life Lessons and Moral Improvement?) But the filmmakers, including director Mark Dindal, screenwriter David Reynolds, and a slew of incredibly clever animators, are way ahead of you. True, Life Lessons are learned, and Moral Improvement occurs, but Disney's inspiration in getting there comes from a most unlikely source: Warner Bros. The earnestness and "heart" of the Disney machine is replaced by the slapsticky sarcasm of the Bugs Bunny and Road Runner shorts; some of the film's best moments, like Kuzco Llama dressing in drag to escape the bad guys (à la Bugs) or when the lead characters take a tumble off of a perilously high cliff (à la Wile E. Coyote), are direct homages to the Warner classics. And while Kuzco eventually learns to be a better person, he never loses his smarm; his single-minded selfishness and bitchy retorts make him a surprisingly winning lead. (David Spade comes through with some incredibly inspired line readings; it's the rare Disney cartoon indeed that doesn't let its main character get overshadowed by supporting goons.)

There's a joke happening in almost every frame of this movie; kids will love it, of course, but at the screening I attended it was the adult sector – myself included – that laughed the hardest. We gobbled up every appearance of Yzma (who looks like an amazingly aged cocktail waitress whose breasts have sagged below waist level and has the four-martinis-a-day voice of Ms. Kitt – a killer combo) and Kronk (Mr. Warburton is deliriously dim); loved the smashing of the fourth wall; cracked up at the cute 'n' cuddly animals who turn rather vicious; roared at the out-of-nowhere finale that pokes fun at decades of Disney works. And guess what? Not an Oscar-baiting love ballad to be found. *The Emperor's New Groove* is more pure fun than anything else in current release; bring the kids if you want, but don't be embarrassed to see it by yourself for the sheer hilarity of it.

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