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Raya and the Last Dragon review: Hope in a world divided



by Victoria Davis 22 hours ago

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Raya and the Last Dragon offers a message as timely as it is taking. We share our thoughts about the movie, below.

Five lands, divided by mistrust and misunderstanding. One nation, whose chance of unity seems only that of fairytales. *Raya and the Last Dragon* offers, with alluring animation and honest hands, the story of us, of people in conflict and discord, whose problems cannot be solved with

gifts, new leaders, or acts of war. But, instead, by everyday people willing to take the first vulnerable, faith-driven step toward trust.

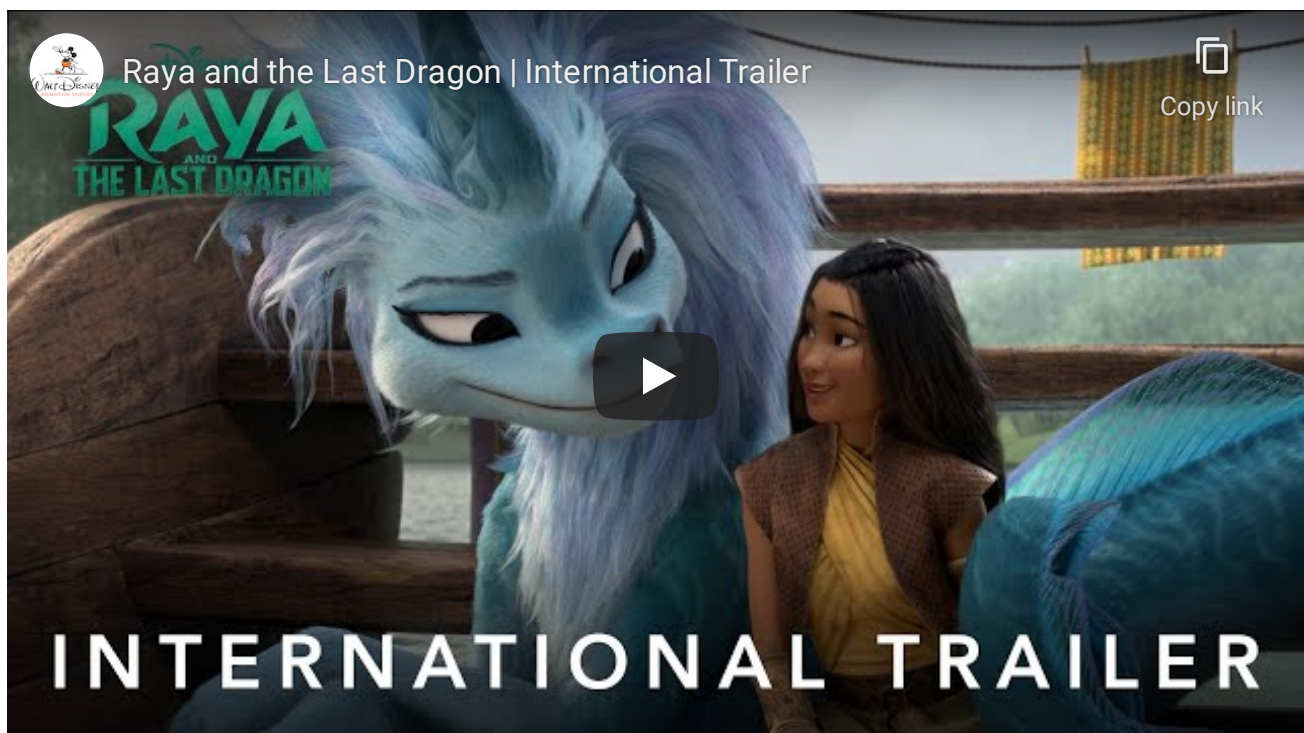
Packed with stunning **Southeast Asian** martial arts—from Pencak Silat to Muay Thai—and rich aesthetics of 3D/CG and 2D animation, with scenery derived from Laos, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines, Disney's *Raya and the Last Dragon* follows the adventures of a former princess Raya (Kelly Marie Tran) turned rogue warrior, and the film's story of distrust is three-fold.

Set in the fictitious, fantastical nation of Kumandra, humans, and dragons live together in harmony. That is, until a twisted, dark life-consuming essence called a Druun was released, turning all of Kumandra's people to stone.

In an effort to save humanity, the "mightiest dragon" Sisu (Awkwafina) used the combined magic of all the dragons to expel the Drunn and save humanity. The dragons, however, remained stone statues.

Despite being saved by the sacrifice of the dragons and their trust in humanity to restore Kumandra, the nation shattered, each land raging wars out of the desire to possess the crystal that held the combined powers of the dragons.

500 years later, amidst an effort to make peace, trust was broken once again and the five lands' leaders shattered the crystal, each taking a piece for themselves. But the crystal's powers weakened and the Drunn was once again released.



Raya and the Last Dragon appears to be a typical Disney hero's journey—a young princess experiences a family tragedy, betrayed by those she trusted and seeks out a superpower to right

the wrongs. But Raya's journey, it turns out, is not about finding Sisu, proving a higher moral lesson, or becoming the most "bad-axe", "butt-kickery" warrior in all the lands.

Directed by Don Hall and Carlos López Estrada, *Raya and the Last Dragon* is a story about seeing the lives of others, breaking down stereotypes and walking in another's shoes. Tran and Awkwafina's on-screen voice chemistry is tangible, and almost feels like two estranged sisters reuniting as adults. And the conflict between Raya and nemesis Namaari (Gemma Chan) is epic but also relatable and felt through the brilliantly choreographed sword fights by Maggie MacDonald.

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With symbolism riddled in the fact that the five nations represent each part of one dragon body—Heart, Spine, Tail, Talon, and Fang—what's so beautiful about the storytelling of screenwriters Qui Nguyen and Adele Lim is that the division that was brought about by five, is only fixed by the trust of five. There is no one hero in this story, there are many and Raya is not even the first to put trust above blind rage.



The same detail to realism that the production team put into the highly-detailed fight sequences and animated Asian scenery was also given heed in each main character's story arch and emotional development. Raya's trust issues from losing her family are at first treated by her like a badge of honor on her breast, but really it's a weight on her shoulders and it's a burden, she finds, carried by many others in different forms.

Eventually, instead of Raya and her comrades using their tragedies as a reason to become assassins and pickpockets, sharing their common heartbreak bonds them as friends and encourages them to look after others as if they were their own family.

While viewer connectivity has often been sought after by Disney through intensely realistic animated characters or musical numbers that give goosebumps, what brings tears to the eyes

with *Raya* is a long-awaited story finally given not one, but many voices. Though make no mistake, the animation by Amy Smeed and Malcon Pierce is gorgeous.

In our own world, operating within a pandemic as well as political and social turmoil, *Raya and the Last Dragon* is the sincere story we've all waited for coming out of 2020. The story of hope and learning to believe in people again, even when there's every reason not to.

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Raya and the Last Dragon is now in theaters and available to stream on [Disney Plus](#). Have you seen it? Tell us your thoughts in the comments below!

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