

The Wonderful World Of Laika

Wholeheartedly dedicated to hands-on animation in a digital era, our upcoming seasons takes a look at the stop-motion studio's special kind of magic...



WHEN YOU PICTURE LAIKA STUDIOS, PERHAPS THE WORLD'S FOREMOST STOP-MOTION ANIMATION COMPANY, it's tempting to imagine an otherworldly place nestled away somewhere. The truth is more mundane - a little less "Magic Kingdom", a little more "two-decades-old warehouse in Oregon" - but perhaps that's better than the fantasy of their mega-corp equivalents. After all, stop-motion is all about the human touch, and Picturehouse's celebration of Laika is the ideal way to see their hand-made sorcery at work.

The company broke out with *Coraline*, the Neil Gaiman-penned tale of a girl who stumbles upon a parallel-universe version of her home (complete with secretly villainous new parents). The film perfectly captures some of Laika's hallmarks: it's completely original, visually dazzling and, perhaps pivotally, unafraid to be genuinely creepy. The film understands the struggles

of growing up, along with the joy of a good scare, and *Coraline* is a fully fleshed-out heroine whose quest feels as close to *Pan's Labyrinth* as it does to *Alice In Wonderland*.

Coraline's delightful spookiness remains in their follow-up, *ParaNorman*. Recent Oscar nominee Kodi Smit-McPhee plays Norman Babcock, a 11-year-old outcast who can speak to the dead and is tasked with breaking his town's curse. An homage to classic monster movies, *ParaNorman* plays with the same ingredients that made *Coraline* a hit: a gorgeously designed world and a big beating heart, with powerful themes of grief and acceptance made family-friendly. It's also worth noting the groundbreaking 3D-printing technology the studio pioneered between films, changing the game for stop-motion. To put it into perspective, whereas 200,000 facial expressions were built for *Coraline*, Norman boasted a whopping 1.5 million.

If these ghoulish stories have you thinking the company's got no range, their next two films couldn't be more different. *The Boxtrolls* is perhaps the most comedic of Laika's films, the story of an unlikely family forged when a baby falls into the hands of the title's delightfully goofy trolls. It's also another perfect example of the studio crafting a universe out of whole cloth. The *Boxtrolls'* underground home is built out of rubbish (and chock-full of cheese), fizzling with visual invention. On the other end of the spectrum lies *Kubo And The Two Strings*, a ravishing epic set in a mythical version of feudal Japan. Like *ParaNorman*, it feels grounded in film history - stop-motion legend Ray Harryhausen's work on *Jason And The Argonauts* looms large - and is by far their largest-scale adventure. Creatures and terrains burst with life as the fable's young hero sets out on a quest to defeat an evil spirit. A starry cast including Ralph Fiennes and Matthew McConaughey doesn't hurt either.

As we wait for the next big thing from Laika, their latest feature, *Missing Link*, is a totally charming way to fill the time. Hugh Jackman's adventurer, Sir Lionel Frost, thinks he's struck gold when he finds a yeti in the wild - but the not-so-abominable snowman, Mr. Link (who'd prefer to be called Susan), has other ideas. The odd couple's globe-trotting quest is a delightful Sherlock Holmes-inspired journey, with a great sense of empathy for the world's misfits. It's something the company certainly seems to share.

In a world where much of the animation industry prioritises quick turnaround over quality control (remember that horrifying earlier version of 2020's *Sonic The Hedgehog*, Sonic's uncanny eyes and teeth the Frankensteined result of a rushed



release?), Laika's stop-motion approach is defined by the opposite: a tremendous amount of care and attention. Their hand-made creations move around elaborate miniature sets, filmed frame by frame; their work is so striking precisely because of this level of love. It can be hard to challenge the norm, but beauty lies in individuality - something they seem to have told us in their stories all along. **P Lara Peters**

Picturehouse's celebration of Laika begins from 21 October, with Culture Shock and Kids' Club screenings at selected cinemas. A touring exhibition of Laika's work will also be available at two of our cinemas. Please check our website for full details.



Opposite page: *Coraline*
This page, from the top: *The Boxtrolls*,
ParaNorman, *Missing Link*, *Kubo And The Two Strings*

