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Can Pixar Still Go Up?

By RICHARD CORLISS

Among the freshmen at Monsters University, Mike Wazowski stands out like any creature who's basically an eyeball with feet would. With the brains, drive and guts to be a BMOC (Big Monster on Campus), Mike lacks just one talent: shock appeal. His "Boo!" is a lullaby to kids who need the sleep scared out of them. "If you're not scary," the dean says, "what kind of a monster are you?"

Back in 1995, when Pixar birthed Toy Story--the company's, and the world's, first computer-generated feature--some people wondered what kind of a cartoon it was. Disney had recently set the standard with sumptuous, hand-drawn retellings of familiar tales (The Little Mermaid, Aladdin, Pocahontas) involving human characters. Instead, John Lasseter and his gang of rebel innovators devised clever stories around the objects that the CGI technology of the time could reasonably render: toys, insects (A Bug's Life), fish (Finding Nemo) and those anti-toys, the working-class ogres of Pete Docter's 2001 Monsters, Inc. Pixar junked Disney's dewy realism for a style that looked like what your computer might produce on its own if it had an impish mind and a wise heart.

History was on Pixar's side. Within a decade, the old 2-D format that had fed feature animation from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs to The Lion King was kaput, replaced by the pixels of Pixar, DreamWorks Animation (Shrek, Madagascar) and Fox's Blue Sky (Ice Age). More important, Lasseter's band of nice-guy geniuses made blockbusters that were also enduring works of art. They located the pulsing, poignant humanity in a robot (WALL•E), a rodent (Ratatouille) and an auto graveyard (Cars). Pixar capped its run of 11 amazing movies, all from scenarios its brain trust dreamed up, with Docter's Up and Lee Unkrich's Toy Story 3.

No golden age lasts forever. Since Toy Story 3, Pixar films have ever so slightly degenerated, from great to merely very good (Brave), with one awful (Lasseter's Cars 2). Monsters University, the studio's first prequel, plops Mike (Billy Crystal) and his pal Sulley (John Goodman) in a college setting for maximum family diversion. And yet Pixar's fondest admirers must acknowledge that the studio has entered its first post-masterpiece period.

Movies are a business. In 2006, Disney paid \$7.4 billion to buy Pixar; Toy Story 3 validated that investment by becoming the first animated feature to gross more than \$1 billion. Today the big money is in sequels. In nine of the past 10 years, the top-grossing film was a sequel, including Toy Story 3. Pixar still makes originals--The Good Dinosaur (next May) and Inside Out (2015)--but is playing it safer with the likes of Cars 2, the Finding Nemo sequel Finding Dory (2015) and Monsters University, which has the old Pixar polish. All that's missing is the shock of the new.

Monsters University is jolly, creepy fun. Running cunning variations on the teen-school milieu of the Harry Potter films, it posits an edgy rivalry-camaraderie between little Mike and the big scare-bear Sulley. At this monster-world Hogwarts, with giant hogs and real warts, Mike and Sulley join the loser frat Oozma Kappa (OK), which opens the story to a gaggle of beguiling misfits, a doting den mother and, finally, a sweet, semi-Oedipal twist.

The design palette is both midnight-spooky and cartoon-cheerful. Each of the Hunger Games--style contests they enter has its own dramatic and comic delights. Monsters University is up there with some of the best college comedies. Just not with some of the best Pixar movies.

For the finest animation, you still go to Pixar. But for true film art, you need to go back a few years--to WALL•E, Up and Toy Story 3. Or to hope that The Good Dinosaur will be the next Pixar masterpiece.