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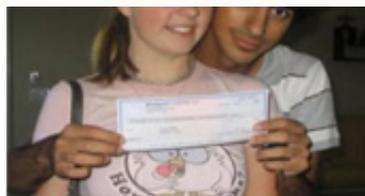


PING PONG

YOSUKE KUBOZUKA
ARATA
SAM LEE
SHIDO NAKAMURA
KOJI OKURA

DIRECTED BY SORI
WRITTEN BY KANKURO KUDO
BASED ON A COMIC BY TAIYO MATUMOTO
DISTRIBUTED BY ASMIK ACE

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Movie Details

Post Author: Matt Ho July 3, 2013 0

OUR RATING 

DIRECTOR FUMIHIKO SORI

WRITER KANKURO KUDO



US BOX OFFICE NA

RUN TIME 1 HR. 54 MIN. RATED PG

YOUR RATING

GENRE COMEDY, INTERNATIONAL, SPORTS

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SYNOPSIS

Ping Pong is the live adaptation of Taiyo Matsumoto's manga that tells the story of high school table tennis players and best friends Peco (Yosuke Kabozuka) and Smile (Arata). When both lose at the inter-school competition, Smile is forced into intense training having lost a bet against his coach Butterfly Joe (Naoto Takenaka), who desperately wants to help him realize his full potential. Peco quits devastated by his defeat, but ultimately rediscovers why he played in the first place.

REVIEW

Going from manga to film is extremely ambitious given the challenges of translating the medium's wildly imaginative imagery into reality. There's a damn good reason why Warner Bros. is having trouble handling the remake of Katsuhiro Otomo's cult-classic, *Akira*. Then there's the daunting task of condensing massive volumes of stories within the two hour timeframe, since some Japanese comics

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Source: *The Numbers* - Movie Box Office

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retain continuity from a single storyline that can run for years (i.e. *One Piece*). I've never read Taiyo Matsumoto's *Ping Pong*, but based on what I know from research, it's one of the very, very few exceptions where an adaptation can work and is actually good.

For one, *Ping Pong* is set in the real world, so bringing the artwork to life plays into director Fumihiko Sori's favor. From the few images I've seen of the original illustrations, I can safely say that he's pretty faithful when it comes to bringing the black and white pages to the big screen. The direction of the ping pong sequences in particular are worth noting. This interpretation is debatable, but I found the combination of slow motion and close-ups on the actors during these scenes helped emulate the manga's highly expressive action panels.

It may not be a 100% accurate shot-by-shot depiction, however, it's pretty close and it's a nice nod to Matsumoto's work. Some might find it a little too dramatic, but I found it to be a welcoming touch as opposed to a hindrance. The transitions back to normal speed are smooth, and Sori does a good job providing various angles and points of view so that there's always a balance of perspectives.

Despite Matsumoto's reputation as an unconventional/surrealist artist, most of the actors do look like their respective manga counterparts without appearing ridiculously cartoonish in their transformation. Yosuke Kabozuka's bowl haircut may leave some saying otherwise, but let's face it: that look is always a hard sell and it's necessary for his portrayal of Peco.

Considering how *Ping Pong* is only five volumes long, it's a very manageable story to fit within the time constraints of film. Again, I've never read it, but it seems like writer Kankuro Kudo succeeded in amalgamating all the important components into one cohesive script. The film doesn't feel rushed, nor does it feel like its lacking something to tie it all together. All the characters are steadily introduced, their relationships are clearly established and everything plays out at an appropriate pace.

“Enter the hero!”-Peco

If you look at the overall picture, *Ping Pong* does follow the formula of a typical sports flick. You have characters beaten by rivals, who are then thrown into a period of identity crisis, followed by an epiphany that marks their return through a training montage. However, there is a little more to the film considering it's a character-driven story largely centered on the relationship between Peco and Smile, two players who are such polar opposites.

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The former is talented, but is also an abrasive, trash-talking, over-confident player who's lazy. He's not always likable, but he does have redeeming qualities and does change for the better in his own subtle way. The latter is a quiet, introverted individual who plays ping pong to kill time and rationalizes letting others win for the sake of sparing them the embarrassment of loss.

Usually with this sort of narrative, the brief dissolution of the friendship acts as the conflict so that the film concludes with a reunion. Instead, the plot quietly separates the two without the drama, and uses the idea of self-discovery to reignite Peco's passion and self-worth as a form of resolution. It's through his revelation that Smile's faith in him as a hero is restored, which is the film's ubiquitous theme. From there *Ping Pong* gets more predictable, as it becomes clear that the point is for both characters to meet in the finale. They inevitably overcome their worthy adversaries prior to facing one another, though I do question how Peco miraculously does so with a bad knee. The last match is never shown in full, but a winner is revealed in a fade-out scene. This is where the debate begins among fans: does the victor succeed through skill and perseverance? Or was the game thrown?

The supporting characters serve their purpose, even though they are variations of archetypes you expect from a manga within the sports genre. Kong (Sam Lee), Kazama (Shido Nakamura) and Sakuma (Koji Okura) are the formidable opponents for our heroes to rise against, but they're never treated as villains and they do contribute to the plot individually. Butterfly Joe (Naoto Takenaka) is written as the typical coach with a glorious past who threw it all away. There's nothing too original about his back story, but he brings comic relief and he's a somewhat of an important figure to Smile as both a substitute companion for Peco, as well as a mentor.

One of the best things about *Ping Pong* is the soundtrack. The now defunct Japanese band Supercar provides electro-pop music that perfectly suits the film's lighthearted tone. For those interested, the majority of the tracks are off their 2002 album *Highvision*.

VERDICT

While *Ping Pong* does follow a structure that's predictable at times, it's still an enjoyable feel-good film that incorporates various themes to give it a level of depth. The cast deliver solid performances, the soundtrack is excellent, and it's a story that maintains your interest in not just the sport, but the characters as well. There are several mangas that should've never, ever been adapted, but thankfully, this is one that's been tackled with success.



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