

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/luca-review-a-matter-of-scale-s-11623965078>

## FILM REVIEW

# 'Luca' Review: A Matter of Scale(s)

In this new Pixar flick, which skips the big screen for a Disney+ debut, two young sea monsters living by the Italian Riviera turn into teenage boys on dry land



By

[Joe Morgenstern](#)

June 17, 2021 5:24 pm ET

 **Listen to Article** (6 minutes)

 **Queue**

Summer wouldn't be summer without a Pixar film to savor. The studio's latest release, via Disney, is "Luca," a beguiling fable of friendship and discovery set on, and off, the glittering coastline of the Italian Riviera in the mid-20th century. But first a few words about how the film will be seen—literally seen—before looking at its charms, and at some limitations that I'll save for last.

Instead of opening in theaters, as productions from Pixar Animation Studios traditionally do, this one will be showing only on the Disney+ channel, except for a single token engagement at El Capitan, the company's flagship theater in Hollywood.

Approximate precedents can be found. After the theatrical run of "Onward" was cut short by the pandemic in March 2020, the picture reached most of its audience through streaming. "Soul" played exclusively on TV screens last December because of the Covid-19 shutdown. But those were singular circumstances.

Now many theaters around the country have reopened, and wider openings are imminent. Yet Disney, Pixar's owner, has chosen to turn "Luca" into streaming

---

## MORE FILM REVIEWS

---

[‘Rita Moreno: Just a Girl Who Decided to Go for It’  
Review: Surviving—and Thriving June 17, 2021](#)

[‘In the Heights’ Review: You’re the Top June 10, 2021](#)

[‘Sublet’ Review: Testing the Waters in Tel Aviv  
June 10, 2021](#)

[‘The Human Condition’ Review: A Japanese Epic in  
High-Def June 8, 2021](#)

fodder. It’s a decision that diminishes the Pixar brand and raises questions about the future of a studio that has set phenomenally high standards for originality, elegant craftsmanship and narrative energy. Or amplifies fairly recent questions, since “Onward” was, for all its cheerful oddity, erratically crafted and transparently desperate to please.



Luca and Daniela

PHOTO: PIXAR/DISNEY

“Luca” does please, at its own pace—with visions of an Italian village as radiant as a travel poster; undersea sequences that recall a more innocent time in animated entertainment; a couple of spirited buddies exploring a domain that’s above as well as beyond their imaginations; and a magical transformation that gets better each time it’s repeated.

A transformation and a toggling—between the spectacle of gawky, teenage boys, which is what the pair appear to be on dry land, and sea monsters, which is what they’ve been and still are in the coastal waters they’ve called home until now. (Luca, the younger one, is voiced brightly by Jacob Tremblay. Jack Dylan Grazer plays Luca’s best friend and guide, the cocky Alberto, who has already spent time on shore and thinks he knows the lay of the land.) Ancient legend had it that those

waters were infested with such creatures, and legend proves correct, though the wiggly-tailed heroes and their families are anything but monstrous in their aquatic forms. Luca is wide-eyed, and earnest to a fault, while his toothy, tubby and timorous mother, Daniela ( Maya Rudolph ), warns him that “we do not go anywhere near the surface.”

Lucky for him, and us, that he disobeys her. Luca’s and Alberto’s plunge into a terrestrial, less-hydrated life is funny and affecting—and, for better or worse, instructive, though not intrusively so, as in many Disney releases. It’s a coming-of-age story about Luca tapping an inner, hitherto hidden reservoir of courage. It’s about fear of rejection and eventual self-acceptance—both friends hide their identities from the humans around them before revealing themselves as the special creatures they are. It’s also an exuberant physical comedy powered by a great sight gag. Whenever water touches them in the human world, the protagonists don’t perish like the Wicked Witch of the West. They just turn scaly, then frantically try to descale themselves by getting dry. (Their new village friend, and unsuspecting co-conspirator during an adventurous summer, is a zestfully spunky girl named Giulia, voiced by Emma Berma. Saverio Raimondo gives a witty performance as Ercole Visconti, a village bully who hasn’t quite figured out the visitors’ secret but thinks something smells you know what.)

Advertisement - Scroll to Continue



Alberto and Luca

PHOTO: PIXAR/DISNEY

“Luca” is a debut feature by Enrico Casarosa, who directed from a screenplay by Jesse Andrews and Mike Jones. It’s clearly a labor of love, and a pictorial feast containing intricate tributes and touching homages—to Italian film culture, as evidenced by Alberto’s treasured photo of Marcello Mastroianni, a poster for Federico Fellini’s “La Strada” and the bully’s last name; to the peerless animation director Hayao Miyazaki, as indicated by the name of the village, Portorosso. That’s a reference to Mr. Miyazaki’s “Porco Rosso,” an underappreciated masterpiece of graphic design.

Mr. Casarosa’s film is beautiful too—no surprise there, since he previously did “La Luna” (2011), an exquisitely visualized, Oscar-nominated Pixar short in which an Italian boy in a maritime setting not unlike the one in “Luca” climbs a ladder at night from a fishing boat to the moon and teaches his elders a thing or two about how to sweep up stars that have fallen on the lunar surface. There’s no story, as such. The only logic is that of the fable—things happen magically, to magical effect.

Something of the same quality suffuses but also limits “Luca.” Lack of narrative drive or dramatic development isn’t a bad thing in “La Luna,” whose running time is only 7 minutes. It isn’t a good thing in a 95-minute feature, although “Luca” clocks in at only 84 minutes if you subtract the end credits, an unusually short run time that contributes to a sense of insubstantiality. As pleasing as the film is, some of it feels arbitrary, underdeveloped, possibly rushed. Could that be why

Disney decided to send it directly to home screens? No way of knowing, but one thing is certain. If “Luca” had shown in theaters, an enjoyable entertainment would have been even better.

Write to Joe Morgenstern at [joe.morgenstern@wsj.com](mailto:joe.morgenstern@wsj.com)

*Appeared in the June 18, 2021, print edition as “Luca’: A Matter of Scale(s).’*

## UPCOMING EVENTS

June  
**24**  
2021

**11:00 AM - 5:00 PM EDT**  
Global Food Forum

June  
**30**  
2021

**1:00 PM - 1:45 PM EDT**  
WSJ Pro Cybersecurity Webinar: Aligning IT and Cybersecurity

June  
**30**  
2021

**7:00 PM - 7:45 PM EDT**  
WSJ+ Live: Daniel Kahneman and His Co-Authors on the Crisis of ‘Noise’

**ADD TO CALENDAR**

Copyright © 2021 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.