

Migration (2023 film)

Migration is a 2023 American animated adventure comedy film produced by Universal Pictures and Illumination, and distributed by Universal. The film was directed by Benjamin Renner, co-directed by Guylo Homsy, and produced by Chris Meledandri, from a screenplay written by Mike White and a story by White and Renner. It stars the voices of Kumail Nanjiani, Elizabeth Banks, Keegan-Michael Key, Awkwafina, and Danny DeVito. The story follows a family of mallards who try to convince their overprotective father to go on a vacation of a lifetime and attempt to migrate from New England, through New York City, to Jamaica.

Illumination announced *Migration* in February 2022, with Renner, Homsy, and White attached as director, co-director, and writer, respectively. Renner, who had previously helmed traditionally animated films, including *Ernest & Celestine* (2012) and *The Big Bad Fox and Other Tales...* (2017), was tasked with adapting his simple drawing style for a computer-animated film. In hiring Renner, studio head and producer Meledandri sought to focus on a filmmaker's vision for the project in comparison with Illumination's recent films. John Powell composed the score, marking his second collaboration with Illumination following *The Lorax* (2012).

Migration premiered at the VIEW Conference in Turin, Italy, on October 19, 2023, and was theatrically released in the United States on December 22. The film received generally positive reviews from critics and grossed \$298 million worldwide.

Plot

In Moosehead Pond, somewhere in a New England forest, anxious Mack Mallard prevents his kids, Dax and Gwen, from venturing into the outside world, much to the chagrin of his wife, Pam.

One day, the Mallards meet a flock of migrating blue-winged teal ducks who are en route south to Jamaica, which the family finds interesting, but Mack forbids them to join. Pam tells Mack that he must open his eyes to the world outside him. That night, Mack talks with his aging Uncle Dan, who also does not want to leave

Migration



Theatrical release poster

Directed by Benjamin Renner

Screenplay by Mike White

Story by Mike White
Benjamin Renner

Produced by Chris Meledandri

Starring Kumail Nanjiani
Elizabeth Banks
Keegan-Michael Key
Awkwafina
Carol Kane
David Mitchell
Isabela Merced
Caspar Jennings
Tresi Gazal
Danny DeVito

Edited by Christian Gazal

Music by John Powell

the pond. However, Uncle Dan makes Mack re-evaluate his stance and he decides to let his family migrate, with Uncle Dan joining them at Gwen's behest.

However, shortly after taking off, they fly into a rainstorm and take up shelter in a swamp underneath a boardwalk, where they encounter an elderly great blue heron named Erin, who brings them to her shack to spend the night with herself and her husband, Harry. Despite their frightening disposition, Erin proves their good intentions by saving Dax and Gwen from a catfish.

The following day, the Mallards arrive in New York City, where Uncle Dan falls behind and ends up getting the ducks in trouble with a flock of pigeons, led by the pugnacious Chump, but Pam's fiery disposition puts them in Chump's good graces. Chump leads them to her friend, Delroy, a Scarlet macaw who is from Jamaica, but lives caged by a human chef that owns him. Wanting to set Delroy free, Mack and Pam infiltrate The Ciguapi, the restaurant where the chef works to acquire a key to his cage. After evading the humans, they manage to get the key and free Delroy, who gratefully guides them to Jamaica.

Production companies	<u>Universal Pictures</u> <u>Illumination</u>
Distributed by	Universal Pictures
Release dates	October 19, 2023 (<u>VIEW Conference</u>) December 22, 2023 (United States)
Running time	83 minutes ^[1]
Country	United States
Language	English
Budget	\$72 million ^[2]
Box office	\$298.1 million ^{[3][4]}

While Gwen stops for a bathroom break, Mack discovers an entrance to a paradise full of pekins. The group begins to enjoy themselves, but Dax soon finds out the whole place is a duck farm, with the chef from earlier being one of its clients. Dax helps the pekins and his family escape the farm, but he loses his wing feathers after being stepped on by the chef, rendering him flightless. The birds stop to rest at a resort in Florida, where Mack scolds Dax for his heedless actions.

The chef finds the birds via helicopter and traps them in a net while Dax and Gwen manage to hide. Inside, the chef plans to kill Mack and Pam first as revenge, prompting Pam to give in to despair, only for Mack to raise her spirits. Using a salsa dance they learned at the restaurant, they attempt to push a button to release the birds, but the chef catches them in the act. At this point, Delroy has finally had enough, and he, Uncle Dan and the pekins pelt the chef with fruits and vegetables until he is knocked unconscious, hitting a button that causes the helicopter to drop him out, getting him caught in the net, as well as Pam and Mack, still stuck in their cage. They are saved and freed by their kids, with Dax having fixed his wings using some feathers that were lost when the chef kidnapped the birds. Both father and son silently reconcile.

Now led by Dax, the birds arrive in Jamaica, where Delroy reunites with his family and the Mallards catch up with the duck family who visited their pond earlier. The following spring, the family is about to head for home when Mack shows them a group of lost penguins that need to get to the South Pole, agreeing to help them get there.

Voice cast

- Kumail Nanjiani as Mack Mallard, the anxious father of Dax and Gwen and husband of Pam
- Elizabeth Banks as Pam Mallard, the daring and quick-witted mother of Dax and Gwen and wife of Mack
- Caspar Jennings as Dax Mallard, Mack and Pam's confident and restless preteen son
- Tresi Gazal as Gwen Mallard, Mack and Pam's innocent and lovable daughter

- Danny DeVito as Uncle Dan, Mack's curmudgeonly, adventure-averse uncle and Dax and Gwen's great-uncle
- Keegan-Michael Key as Delroy, a homesick Jamaican-accented scarlet macaw locked away in a restaurant in Manhattan
- Awkwafina as Chump, the one-footed leader of a New York City pigeon gang
- Carol Kane as Erin, a great blue heron who the Mallards befriend on their journey
- David Mitchell as GooGoo, an American Pekin who is the yogic leader of a duck farm
- Isabela Merced as Kim, a blue-winged teal duck whose family is heading to Jamaica

Production

Development and writing

In February 2022, Illumination announced a new film titled *Migration*, with French animator and comic book creator Benjamin Renner set to direct with Guylo Homsy as co-director and Mike White set to pen the script.^[5] In April 2023, more film crew such as editor Christian Gazal and production designer Colin Stimpson were revealed.^[6] Renner previously directed the traditionally animated films *Ernest & Celestine* (2012) and *The Big Bad Fox and Other Tales...* (2017), and was already a household name among the staff of Illumination Studios Paris prior to his involvement with the company.^[7] Illumination head and film producer Chris Meledandri hired Renner to direct the studio's first original project since 2016 for his filmmaking sensibility, stating during his visit to the Annecy International Animation Film Festival that there is a "filmmaker attention" for *Migration* in comparison with Illumination's recent releases up to *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* (2023).^[7]



Director Benjamin Renner in 2023

Renner described *Migration* as *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), but with ducks.^[8] The film's tone becomes more tense as the story progresses.^[9] Renner drew influences from his childhood experiences and dynamics with his family when making humorous situations for the Mallard family. Gwen and the situations surrounding her character are inspired by his experiences as the youngest sibling in his family.^[10] When shaping the film's humor, Renner wanted to avoid "lazy jokes," which he felt were common in family films.^[10] He aimed for a sense of humor that could appeal to both children and adults.^[8] For example, he made sure that any slapstick humor in the film was both thought through and had an extra dimension to it.^[10] Additionally, a general rule he made for himself was for there to be no fart jokes.^[8] The filmmakers sought to treat the humans in the film in the way they believed ducks perceived them. Renner said, "The humans are treated like animals in the movie, in that only the birds understand each other."^[11]

White described the film as using a "comedic fantasy landscape" to explore its central themes. He said that the film has more depth than a standard children's film and a lot of Illumination's output, but still retains a zaniness that appeals to children.^[8] Renner described the main theme in the film as "getting out of your comfort zone, facing life, and accepting that fear is part of life."^[10]

Casting

In April 2023, Kumail Nanjiani, Elizabeth Banks, Keegan-Michael Key, Awkwafina, Danny DeVito, Caspar Jennings, Tresi Gazal (in her film debut), David Mitchell, and Carol Kane were announced to be part of the film's lead voice cast.^[6] Renner made sure that the cast members connected with their respective characters. For example, Nanjiani's love for routine and his stand-up comedy sketches of him complaining about things made him connect with Mack, while Banks is open to trying new things and new experiences, making her connect with Pam.^[12] Tresi is the daughter of the film's editor, Christian Gazal, and was brought in to provide scratch vocals for Gwen. She would end up voicing the character in the finished film.^[13]

Animation and design

The film's animation was handled by Illumination Studios Paris.^[11] Renner was tasked with adapting his minimalist drawing style from previous films for a computer-animated film, which requires backgrounds to be fully visualized and rendered instead of suggested;^[9] he had previously designed the visuals for the French-Belgian computer-animated film about migrating birds titled Yellowbird (2014), which was noted for not strictly adhering to photorealism.^[14] Renner described the difference between traditional animation and computer animation as being that the former is additive while the latter is subtractive. Working with computer animation, the director found that there were many elements he felt did not belong, such as texture, lighting and shading.^[15] For the opening scene, Renner wanted to do something that was visually different from the rest of the film. He said that it is "a story before we get to the real story of the film." The scene is not actually traditional animation, but rather computer animation that looks traditional. Renner first did the scene using traditional animation, and then the team recreated it using computer animation, keeping as close to the reference as possible.^[12]

For *Migration*, Renner explained that he took inspiration from naturally expressive animals in the wild in creating characters that have distinctly expressive features in their designs.^[9] He described the ducks as challenging to design by the team. He recalled a team of 50 animators studying a real duck at Illumination.^[15] Stimpson said, "Ducks are strange, complex-looking creatures and they all look alike!" As a result, designing the characters to both look appealing and distinct from one another was difficult.^[11] Nature was the main inspiration for the color palette of the film; it contrasted with the more heightened color palettes of previous Illumination films.^[11] A trip Stimpson took to New York City helped in forming the location in the film. According to Stimpson, great care was taken in portraying Jamaica. The setting in which the Mallards arrive is inspired by the country's Blue Mountains.^[11] The visuals in the scene with the heron couple were inspired by The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920). That scene is followed by one with the Mallards flying through the clouds; it was added following a request from Meledandri. Renner's view of the clouds during his plane trips to Illumination Studios Paris inspired the scene.^[11]

Music

On June 18, 2023, it was announced that John Powell would compose the film's music, marking his second collaboration with Illumination following The Lorax (2012).^[16] Powell and Renner connected over their love of classical music.^[17] Renner wanted a score that had "a level of unusual creativity" and fun. The score uses a lot of string instruments and human vocals. Powell tried emulating 1960s music, in which there were a lot of vocals, and Renner responded positively.^[18] He also felt that he may have gotten the gig after

expressing his admiration of Sergei Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* (1936) to the director.^[17] Mon Laferte performed a cover of Destiny's Child's 2001 single "Survivor" for the film.^[19] The soundtrack album was released on December 15, 2023.^[19]

Release

Theatrical

Migration's world premiere took place on October 19, 2023, as the grand summit matinee of the VIEW Conference expo in Turin, Italy.^[20] The film was theatrically released in the United States on December 22,^[21] and is the first animated film to be released worldwide in the ScreenX format.^[22] It was released in stereoscopic 3D,^[23] accompanied in theaters by the *Despicable Me* short film, *Mooned*.^[24] The film was initially scheduled for release on June 30, 2023,^[5] but was postponed to its current release date, with DreamWorks Animation's *Ruby Gillman*, *Teenage Kraken* taking its original date.^[21] On June 14, 2023, Illumination gave a special 25-minute preview of *Migration* at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival, with Renner and Meledandri attending the event.^[9]

Home media

Migration was released on digital download on January 23, 2024,^[25] and on DVD, Blu-ray and 4K Ultra HD on February 27. It includes three short films: *Fly Hard*, *Mooned*, and *Midnight Mission*.^[26]

The film was made available to stream on NBCUniversal's Peacock streaming service on April 19, 2024.^[27] As part of their 18-month deal with Netflix, the film is streaming on Peacock for the first four months of the pay-TV window, then will move to Netflix for the next ten, and then will return to Peacock for the remaining four.^{[28][29]}

Reception

Box office

Migration grossed \$127.3 million in the United States and Canada, and \$170.8 million in other territories, for a worldwide total of \$298.1 million.^{[3][4]}

In the United States and Canada, *Migration* was released alongside *Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom*, *Anyone but You* and *The Iron Claw*, and was projected to gross \$10–15 million from 3,761 theaters in its four-day opening weekend.^[30] The film made \$5.8 million on its first day, including \$1.5 million from Thursday night previews. It went on to debut with \$12.5 million, finishing third at the box office, and marked Illumination's lowest-grossing opening weekend.^{[31][32]} In its second weekend, the film made \$17.2 million, finishing second.^[33] *Migration* then made \$10 million in its third weekend of release, finishing in fourth place.^{[34][35]}

Critical response

On the review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes, 72% of 101 critics' reviews are positive, with an average rating of 6.3/10. The website's consensus reads: "Beautiful animation and entertaining work from a talented voice cast help *Migration* take flight in spite of a story that doesn't quite stand out from the flock."^[36] Metacritic, which uses a weighted average, assigned the film a score of 56 out of 100, based on 25 critics, indicating "mixed or average" reviews.^[37] Audiences surveyed by CinemaScore gave the film an average grade of "A" on an A+ to F scale, while PostTrak reported 79% of filmgoers gave it a positive score, with 52% saying they would definitely recommend the film.^[31]

A positive review for the French newspaper La Croix, although finding the plot rather predictable, gave the film 3 stars out of 5 and praised its sense of burlesque.^[38] Michael Ordoña of the Los Angeles Times similarly critiqued the plot's predictability. They, however, praised the film for differing from Illumination's previous filmography, particularly in the animation, humor, and voice performances.^[39] Lovia Gyarkye of The Hollywood Reporter praised the film's direction, humor, and emotional core and concluded that its "considerable appeal perhaps lies in the simplicity of its premise: The hardest part of embarking on any new journey is taking off."^[40] Writing for the San Francisco Chronicle, Zaki Hassan compared *Migration* favorably to Illumination's other 2023 film, The Super Mario Bros. Movie, saying, "While that film found success thanks to multigenerational nostalgia, this one soars higher by creating an original world and making the audience feel invested in the characters' journeys."^[41] Aparita Bhandari of The Globe and Mail felt that the film retained a balance between appealing to younger and older audiences and directed particular praise to Tresi Gazal's voice performance.^[13]

Soren Andersen of The Seattle Times gave the film a 2 out of 4 star rating and, in contrast, felt the film lacked appeal for older audiences, criticizing its lack of subtlety in its themes.^[42] Jake Coyle of the Associated Press commended the animation for its "warm cartoon tones" and "lush sense of color," but felt that the story was unoriginal, writing that "it never quite spreads its wings."^[43] Kristen Page-Kirby of The Washington Post also directed praise at the animation, but felt the story lacked memorability and concluded, "*Migration* will be remembered as neither great nor terrible. It will simply fade into the cinematic ether like so many ducks in the wind."^[44] Ryan Gaur of IGN gave the film a 5 out of 10 and felt that *Migration* was a step above Illumination's previous filmography with its animation and character dynamics, but was still weighed down by a tedious story and the occasional "typical brand of Illumination humor."^[45]

Accolades

Award	Date of ceremony	Category	Recipient(s)	Result	Ref.
<u>Hollywood Music in Media Awards</u>	<u>November 15, 2023</u>	<u>Best Original Score — Animated Film</u>	<u>John Powell</u>	Nominated	^[46]
<u>Annie Awards</u>	<u>February 17, 2024</u>	<u>Outstanding Achievement for Voice Acting in an Animated Feature Production</u>	Tresi Gazal	Nominated	^[47]
<u>Visual Effects Society Awards</u>	<u>February 21, 2024</u>	<u>Outstanding Virtual Cinematography in a CG Project</u>	Guylo Homsy, Damien Bapst, Antoine Collet, David Dangin	Nominated	^[48]

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