'Raya and the Last Dragon' stars on making history

(TNS) — Raya is a young warrior princess determined to save the world — she just doesn't trust a lot of people anymore.

She does believe in Sisu, the legendary dragon whose magic helped save humanity the last time it was threatened. But when Raya finally meets Sisu, the dragon is not quite what she expected.

"From a young age, Raya knows exactly what she wants," said Kelly Marie Tran, the Vietnamese American actor who voices the titular character in "Raya and the Last Dragon." "And then she experiences something traumatic and she sort of views the world differently. But the whole time, she's very much fighting for herself and the things that she believes in."

Out Friday in theaters and through premier access on Disney+, "Raya and the Last Dragon" is set in a land called Kumandra and is the first Walt Disney Animation film inspired by Southeast Asian cultures. Directed by Don Hall ("Big Hero 6") and Carlos López Estrada ("Blindspotting"), the film's screenplay was written by playwright Qui Nguyen and Adele Lim ("Crazy Rich Asians").

Starring opposite Tran is Awkwafina as the voice of Sisu, who she said is unlike other dragons people encounter in pop culture.

Raya, voiced by Kelly Marie Tran, and Sisu, voiced by Awkwafina, in "Raya and the Last Dragon."

Disney/TNS

"I don't think I've seen a dragon that knows that she's imperfect," said Awkwafina. "She loves openly, loves food and is just kind of goofy. But she has an innocence about her that — thinking about her now — I wish I had a little bit more of, in terms of how she looks at the world and how she looks at people."

Tran, who came to fame as "Star Wars: The Last Jedi" heroine Rose Tico, appreciated that Raya is allowed to experience a full range of emotions during her journey.

"You get to see her be vulnerable and sad, and then funny and witty and sarcastic, and then like a total badass warrior, and then just viscerally and justifiably angry," said Tran, "which I didn't know that I needed to see in a character like this. I don't think that we normally get to see female characters in this very specific genre of film ever get to be angry."

Like her fellow modern animated Disney princesses — such as Moana and Elsa — Raya's adventure is not about romantic love. And Tran believes "Raya' does a really good job of showing us that there are many different ways to be brave."

"One of those ways is being a warrior, and literally fighting," said Tran. "And one of those ways is recognizing that maybe you're being blinded by your own anger or your own trauma and trying to see outside of that."

Tran and Awkwafina discussed "Raya and the Last Dragon," their thoughts on Hollywood representation of Asian characters and some childhood favorites.

Q: Raya and Sisu's friendship is one of the central elements of this movie. What are your thoughts on their relationship?

Awkwafina: I love the friendship aspect all around. It just kind of shows you how much trust is needed, and how it can be found in really subtle ways. Even food in the movie resembles friendship and trust and I think the happiest times are over these very warm meals. Sisu and Raya — they really balance each other out, I think, as friends do. There's one that might be a little bit more trusting, and one that wants to warn that one of being trusting, but at the same time learns that maybe [they] shouldn't distrust so much and maybe [they] should believe in people more. They have that balance. And I think that exists in every friendship.

Tran: I agree. I think that the coolest part about seeing their friendship, and the way in which they learn from each other, is just exactly what you said, Awkwafina. The idea that we can have two people who have very different views of the world and yet they still respect each other, and they're still listening to each other, and they change each other, I think, in really good ways. There's a lesson to be learned there for sure.