

Life of the Party squeezes out some chuckles

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «« out of «««««

Running Time: 105 min.

Actress Melissa McCarthy and husband/director Ben Falcone have teamed up a couple of times in the past with the comedies *Tammy* and *The Boss*. Personally, neither of them worked for me, but they did well enough at the box office to inspire another feature.

Life of the Party

is the team's latest collaboration. It isn't particularly strong either, but is a slight improvement over their previous films. There are plenty of quiet stretches, but it does eke out a couple of big laughs over its running time thanks to a talented cast.

Deanna (Melissa McCarthy) is proud but slightly saddened to be saying goodbye to daughter Maddie (Molly Gordon) at university. However, their separation is rather abruptly ended when husband Dan (Matt Walsh) announces that he has fallen in love with a local real estate agent (Julie Bowen) and wants a divorce. Stunned and unsure of what to do next, Deanna confides in best friend Christine (Maya Rudolph). She then decides to re-enroll in university and finish the degree she gave up to become a mother. The lead initially struggles to integrate with the young student body, but soon charms her daughter's friends (who appear to like having a supportive mother figure around).

The concept itself is just an excuse for the lead to embarrass her daughter and ingratiate herself into a sorority. Of course, the plot doesn't really make much sense and the script attempts to incorporate too many characters. There are Deanna's middle-aged friends, as well as the

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campus kids, a boyfriend (Luke Benward), and then the professors. While the boyfriend material is more amusing than expected, much of the attention is devoted to the relationships with the other female students. These gags don't land as effectively. The script also struggles to create big conflict. Much of the tension towards the climax occurs when Dan refuses to pay for Deanna's tuition. Given it's so close to the end of the year, it's a real stretch that she needs money this late in the semester.

Thankfully, there are a few big laughs. One involves a dinner between Deanna, Christine, and her spouse (Damon Jones), as well as another couple at a local restaurant. Things get out of hand quickly when Dan, his new girlfriend, and another unexpected party appear. A public argument causes complete confusion between the characters and some very funny reactions from the other utterly befuddled couple also sitting at the table. Another effective bit involves an oral class presentation for Deanna that goes horribly wrong. Additionally, the movie benefits from Rudolph's comic timing and even gets an effective gag out of a brief cameo with director Falcone.

But between a couple of great individual scenes, there's only the odd chuckle here and there and little else that is memorable. This may in part be due to the fact that Deanna is so sweet and genial and that much of the movie focuses on the mother's transformation into an independent, confident woman and her positive influence on the various students whom she befriends. The intent is well and good, but given some of the broadly played scenarios, the numerous bonding scenes between the characters do come across as forced, overly sentimental, and lacking in comedic bite.

In the end, *Life of the Party* has a couple of big laughs, but several dry spells between the chuckles. Personally, this reviewer found it to be a minor improvement over the couple's previous collaborations, but nothing spectacular. It's an agreeable but middling little film that will likely disappear from memory within a week or two. Truth be told, one might say that it's another one of those movies best suited for weekend afternoon TV-watching.

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