

The Happytime Murders is D.O.A

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 24 August 2018 06:15



Rating: « out of «««««

Running Time: 91 minutes

The latest feature from the late, great Jim Henson's production company tries to put a spin on *Muppet*-like characters, allowing its puppets to engage in adult activities and spout four-letter words.

Truthfully, this isn't the first time this approach has been taken with creations that are more closely associated with children's entertainment. These include the off-Broadway musical *Avenue Q*, as well as the Peter Jackson cult flick, *Meet the Feebles* (1989). Sadly, the newest attempt is *The Happytime Murders*, a production that doesn't reach the same demented heights as either of those previous efforts.

In this filmic world, humans co-exist with walking, talking puppets. Unfortunately for the felt lifeforms, they're shunned by human society with a large portion of people decidedly prejudiced against them. Gruff ex-cop turned private eye puppet Phil (Bill Barretta) has his world turned upside down when his TV-star brother is viciously murdered. The troubled protagonist is re-teamed with his old police partner Connie Edwards (Melissa McCarthy) to help her solve the case. However, she harbors a serious grudge against her old coworker. The pair soon discovers that Phil's brother and the cast of an '80s television program called *The Happytime*

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Gang have been targeted by a killer.

On a certain level, it's fun to see any kind of puppet characters moving around the streets of Los Angeles and interacting with the natural environment. The artistry on display at making these creations live and breathe is impressive. It is also completely understandable why so many talented cast members like McCarthy, Maya Rudolph, Elizabeth Banks and Joel McHale would join in.

The actors do earn a chuckle here and there from what appears to be some ad-libs and improvised dialogue. And there are a couple of shock-value moments, including a trip to a pornographic store for puppets and an exaggerated sex scene between Phil and a nymphomaniac client named Sandra, that are surprisingly graphic.

But beyond the initial shock value, there isn't much here that's funny. Besides being blue and made of felt, humanoid-looking puppet and lead Phil isn't particularly charismatic. The run-down PI swears a lot and acts tough, but isn't all that interesting, nor is he a great choice of a character to introduce viewers to this world.

The movie could have done with a puppet who wasn't afflicted by some addiction to help create a sense of contrast. In fact, almost all of the *Happytime* performers are down on their luck, succumbing to their vices and living on the fringes of society. There isn't much variety to these bits and the humor drains from the scenario very quickly. In the process, the puppets themselves don't end up standing out or making any real impression.

The tone itself also seems very jumbled. There's talk about the troubles the puppets face from nasty humans who treat them poorly. Mere moments later, the movie tries to play the puppet violent demises into comic-set pieces, with their fluffy heads being blown to smithereens or their bodies torn apart by dogs. It leads to more confusion as to the exact pitch and message of the piece.

The movie does earn a laugh out of human Connie's own addiction to sugar (which she ends up snorting through a licorice stick), but after setting her addiction up, the affliction is completely forgotten.

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The end result is a mess. It almost feels like there may have been some re-cutting in the editing room to try to salvage something out of the proceedings. But ultimately, it doesn't work.

This reviewer may have smiled about five times over the course of 90 minutes, which is a terrible hit/miss ratio for a comedy. Rude and crass humor can be funny, but when the jokes don't land, it can be difficult to endure.

The Happytime Murders had potential, but resorts to a dull police procedural story that simply repeats the same blunt jokes until it all becomes tiresome. This movie is dead-on-arrival.

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