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

out of «««««

Running Time: 106 minutes

You know that something must have gone very, very wrong with your movie when the big climax involves a character desperately trying to clear a bowel obstruction (sorry if that piece of information might come as something of a spoiler, but it’s better to know these details in advance than experience a blockage without warning). This week sees the release of *Dolittle*, a big-budget remake of the 1967 Academy Award-winning family film, as well as another popular series of features starring Eddie Murphy, some 20 years ago. Sadly, it’s unlikely that the newest version will earn any accolades. It’s a mess made exclusively for the youngest of kids…and it may not even make a lasting impression with those viewers.

An intro explains that Dr. Dolittle (Robert Downey Jr.) is a veterinarian of sorts who is famous for his ability to communicate with animals and lives on a large estate given to him by Queen Victoria (Jessie Buckley). However, after the tragic death of his adventurer wife, Dolittle has closed his doors and become a recluse. That changes when two children arrive with separate requests. Tommy (Harry Collett) wants the doctor to help with an animal he accidentally injured, while Lady Rose (Carmel Laniado) reports that the Queen is deathly ill. Dolittle charts a course with his animal friends to a distant island in order to find a cure and save the monarch. However, his progress is continually slowed by the Queen’s physician, Dr. Mudfly (Michael

Sheen), who appears to be trailing the heroes across the high seas.

This was clearly a very expensive movie to produce. It’s nicely shot with bright colors and lavish, elaborate sets as they arrive on fantastic and, at times, pirate-filled tropical islands. The one other thing the film has going for it is excellent visual effects. The computer-generated, talking animals generally look impressive, with plenty of talent providing the voices (including the likes of Emma Thompson, Rami Malek, John Cena, Kumail Nanjiani, Octavia Spencer, Ralph Fiennes and many more). When the gorillas, parrots, polar bears and others are given something amusing to do, they’re adorable to watch.

Yet, while a joke here or there does work (Antonio Banderas shows up in the final third and makes effective and comedic use of props, including a machete), just about everything else lands with a crushing thud. Despite being a period picture, the animal lines are littered with anachronisms and modern references. And even the humans, including star Downey Jr., are forced into unnecessarily and exaggerated gesturing and arm waving, making little connection with viewers. The final act ends up resorting to scatological humor (including the aforementioned climax) to try and eke out a laugh or two. Overall, the script’s not-so-amusing gags and comedic timing just don’t hit.

Additionally, the story feels rushed and choppy. Even the action isn’t particularly well delivered or pulse-pounding. A potentially exciting scene involving the protagonists breaking into a castle by scaling a tall wall, actually end ups being narrated by the lead. It’s as if the makers didn’t want to provide any thrills, and only intended to get the story point and sequence over with as quickly as possible. If one were to guess, there was originally a much longer movie here that has been severely edited down to its barest bones.

Little kids may enjoy watching the nicely animated animals talk and act cute. However, most adults will find the picture to be a lost opportunity. There’s plenty that could have been done with a cast of talking fauna and their eccentric human compatriot traveling the world. Whether things weren’t working early in the shoot or the changes came later during the editing process, the film appears to have been heavily tinkered with. It only results in even stranger scenarios that highlight all of the problems present in this adaptation. In the end, *Dolittle* may talk to the animals, but can only deliver a dog’s breakfast.

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