

'H is for happiness' charms, endears viewers

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 25 September 2020 05:04



Rating: «««« out of «««««

Running Time: 98 minutes

Samuel Goldwyn Films will release this title in the U.S. on most VOD/digital platforms.

Making a family movie may seem like a simple task, but these films are far more difficult to create than one might initially expect. Admittedly, most are sweet-natured tales with genial, sometimes slapstick humor, a central message about believing in oneself or encouragement to set out and make the world a better place, along with a neatly tied-up happy ending. When done well, this approach is perfectly acceptable and can provide exceptional entertainment. Still, sometimes the best efforts strive to do even more, or at the very least, approach and depict the world around us as a little more complicated.

H is for Happiness is an Australian feature based on a successful young adult novel by Barry Jonsberg. It follows plucky, optimistic 12-year-old Candace Phee (Daisy Axon), a studious girl who is an outcast because of her direct and blunt manner (likely due to being on the autism spectrum). When teacher Miss Bamford (Miriam Margolyes) assigns a project involving using a letter of the alphabet to tell something to the audience about the world and their lives, Candace is excited. She decides to use the letter "H" to bring happiness to her family.

This includes her depressed parents Claire (Emma Booth) and Jim (Richard Roxburgh), who haven't gotten over the death of Candace's infant sister. The lead also aims to reunite her father with his estranged brother, whom she refers to as "Rich Uncle Brian" (Joel Jackson). Alas, Candace finds the task far harder than anticipated.

Truthfully, this reviewer will admit to having a mixed reaction toward the movie during its opening act. The story is told through Candace's eyes and it is extremely quirky. In fact, its peculiar, low-key sense of humor does take some getting used to. Some of her schemes to help her family are amusing (like faking falling into the water and drowning), while other gags aren't quite as entertaining.

More strangeness occurs with the introduction of a new student, the memorably named Douglas Benson from *Another Dimension* (Wesley Patten). He's one more oddball in a feature full of them, telling the young girl about his arrival from another universe and asking for her help in hurtling himself from a tree in order to return to his original world.

But even though not all of the early material raises a laugh, the movie does slowly begin to win over viewers. Candace's unusual bluntness does earn a few chuckles and another eccentricity, a mystical miniature horse that appears to the kids and stares at them as they play, is a funny and surreal story addition. As the tale progresses and the stakes are raised as characters are forced to face up to their issues, the movie really starts firing on all cylinders. It's certainly a difficult task to balance humor and tragedy, but the entire cast is very engaging.

In fact, the film may end up working even more effectively as a drama than it does as a comedy.

Most children's films present the lead kid as the smartest person in the room. While Candace's intentions are always altruistic and some of her actions do help mend some fences, the protagonist does learn over the course of the story that she can't simply go out, solve the personal issues of those around her and deliver happiness. In fact, the protagonist slowly comes to the bittersweet conclusion that happiness is largely fleeting. It's a bold approach for a kid's film and one you wouldn't see in a Hollywood equivalent.

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While everything isn't tied up cleanly, the film certainly doesn't end on a dour note. Another plus is the exceptional cinematography and production design. This is a colorful movie with gorgeous locations that is impressive to behold from beginning to end. *H is for Happiness* doesn't always deliver pure joy, but that isn't its real intention.

Instead, this is an honest coming-of-age flick featuring likable if peculiar characters. It aptly depicts the world as a complex, complicated yet exhilarating place filled with joy, sadness and possibility. For those looking for something that's a little out of the ordinary, this is a charming and endearing pick.

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