

'Keeping Up with the Joneses' isn't all that necessary

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 21 October 2016 01:51



Rating: «« out of 4 stars

Running Time: 101 min.

Once again, what is funny to some is certainly not to others. A couple of weeks back, I saw a Zach Galifianakis comedy that I got a kick out of... it was strange, surreal, and brought a smile to my face. Less than a month later, he's back in a completely different type of flick. However, this one just didn't work for me. *Keeping Up with the Joneses* is predictable and comes across about as bland as its suburban sprawl setting.

Jeff Gaffney (Zach Galifianakis) is an affable human resources manager at a local tech firm, happily married to his interior designer wife Karen (Isla Fisher). However, with the kids off at summer camp, they begin to feel like their personal life could use a little more excitement.

They get what they asked for when glamorous new neighbors arrive on their cul-de-sac — travel writer Tim Jones (Jon Hamm) and food blogger Natalie (Gal Gadot). They live seemingly perfect lives, which can't help but cause a bit of envy/suspicion from the Gaffneys.

The very capable cast is certainly trying their best to earn laughs. Galifianakis is an amusing foil as the sensitive trainer who encourages communication, and Fisher earns a couple of chuckles with physical comedy in her attempts to tail her neighbors. There's another bit in which Jeff attempts to secretly search the Jones' home and is forced to use his own socks as gloves (which he neglected to bring).

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Hamm also has a couple of funny comments as he begins to befriend Jeff and take his neighbor’s philosophies to heart.

All the same, a chuckle here and there (maybe about a dozen over the course of a 101-minute movie) seems like a poor return when there’s so much talent onscreen. The problem is clearly the script. It takes far too long to get to the good stuff.

Audiences know from the opening scene that the Joneses aren’t what they seem, but the movie still introduces them into the neighborhood, and repeatedly puts them in social situations both individually and together with the Gaffneys. There isn’t any real conflict at this point, and the characters are so genial that the movie lacks any comic edge.

You’d expect to see the Gaffneys stumble around and get involved in dangerous espionage activities, but it doesn’t happen early enough. When all is finally revealed, it comes toward the end of the second act, which gives little time to maximize the inexperience and awkwardness of the suburban couple in a life or death situation.

The climax arrives quickly with little more than a couple of scenes involving Jeff and Karen in danger. And the reveal of the antagonist doesn’t earn more than a weak smile or two. He feels miscast and the mundane conversation just feels dull, instead of providing an amusing contrast with genre tropes.

What’s all the more strange is how little of the film comes together. Earlier bits with the characters getting to know one another all deal with their eccentric interests. Jeff is a beer-brewing enthusiast and is also desperate to try indoor skydiving. Tim introduces his neighbor to bizarre cuisine at a local underground restaurant (which begs all sorts of questions that aren’t answered, but that’s another tangent).

So you’d expect all of the skydiving, beer, and wild-animal talk to pay off when the secret agent escapades begin. But there are few if any callbacks to anything in these early scenes.

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Instead, viewers will see this story creak along in a very predictable and generic manner.

There aren't any surprises here, except for the odd tangents that don't seem to go anywhere. It all feels like a missed opportunity. As the credits roll, you'll likely feel as if *Keeping Up with the Joneses* isn't all that necessary.

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