

Strong cast helps audience overlook ‘Flamin’ Hot’s’ cliches

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 16 June 2023 03:05



Rating: <<<<

out of <<<<<<

Running Time:
99 minutes

This film from Searchlight Pictures will be available Friday, June 9 to stream on Disney+ and Hulu.

We all snack from time to time, but rarely do we think about where our favorite junk food comes from. The new film *Flamin' Hot* attempts to tell the origin story of a popular Frito-Lay flavor from the man who claims to have invented it while working as a janitor at one of the company's factories. Apparently, the validity of the story being depicted has been disputed and elements of this particular adaptation feel contrived. Still, the cast are charming and the movie does possess some amusing moments.

The film begins with Richard Montañez (Jesse Garcia) narrating his unique life story, growing up in San Bernardino County, California, at a labor camp. As a young man, he's abused by his father Vacho (Emilio Rivera) and suffers from mistreatment and racism by locals. After a spell making ends meet working for a local gang, Richard's wife Judy (Annie Gonzalez) finds herself pregnant and the couple are at a crossroads.

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Wanting a better life for his family, Richard finds a job as a janitor at a Frito-Lay plant. He works diligently but can't help asking questions about the machinery and operations, eventually befriending engineer Clarence C. Baker (Dennis Haysbert). When sales begin to slow and layoffs begin, the lead comes up with a spicy new flavor idea he believes will save his factory. Richard's idea meets resistance, but he still attempts to pitch the concept to parent corporation PepsiCo and CEO Roger Enrico (Tony Shalhoub).

While the invention of a new snack product sounds like an odd concept for a feature film, the movie does use it as a way to tell an inspirational story. This is about an outsider struggling to overcome every obstacle imaginable and, in the process, earn admiration and leave his mark on the world.

It's anything but subtle, but the lead is very charismatic and helps the movie overcome some of the formulaic elements. Garcia expertly conveys an inquisitive dreamer with a wild imagination and the screenplay takes advantage of the character trait. Richard's trials are well-rendered and his frustrations are relatable.

There are also plenty of amusing comments and some humorous bits in which Richard imagines what is occurring in PepsiCo boardroom meetings and dreams of taking revenge on a superior for treating him poorly. In fact, all of the performers playing family members are all very likable. Another amusing bit involves young family members reacting and giving their opinions as various flavor formulas are created at home and tested on them. And Shalhoub manages to earn a chuckle or two as a CEO both surprised and impressed by the initiative taken by a janitor.

As mentioned, the storytelling is a bit blunt. Early sections involving Richard's life before arriving at Frito-Lay are montage-heavy and almost overloaded with narration. The film rushes to deliver information about the lead's early life, while setting up personal family conflicts that come into play later in the feature. This is also an uplifting tale, meaning that although viewers witness plenty of conflict, every issue from childhood abuse, family member proselytism, to interactions with gang members and interpersonal problems with coworkers is dealt with and resolved quickly and neatly. This approach does make the movie feel more fanciful and fictional than authentic.

There are some problems with the movie and it's probably best not to take this adaptation as being an authoritative tale of the actual product. Some of what occurred in the film may be true,

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but just as many elements stretch believability. Instead, it’s best to enjoy it as a motivating tale about fighting adversity to achieve one’s goals.

Despite its flaws and a tendency to resolve every subplot in an uplifting manner, the strong work of the cast helps one overlook the film’s cliched elements. “Flamin’ Hot” may not be the best movie snack on the market, but it is an agreeable enough watch to earn a modest recommendation.

***By Glenn Kay
For the Sun***