

Play the Music! Light the Lights!: "The Muppets" and "Hugo"

Written by Mike Schulz

Monday, 28 November 2011 08:22

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THE MUPPETS

I adored nearly every minute of the big-screen reunion *The Muppets*, the musical-comedy brainchild of screenwriters Jason Segel (who also co-stars) and Nicholas Stoller. But before commencing with the rave, I should probably offer a caveat, because I can barely imagine the conditions under which I

ouldn't

have adored this movie.

W

Theoretically, I might've been disappointed if the presentation strayed too far from the playful, sweetly irreverent, occasionally fourth-wall-busting antics of *The Muppet Show* and previous Muppet features, and if the felt characters' voices didn't sound at least

reasonably

close to the unforgettable ones originated by Jim Henson, Frank Oz, and company. (As it stands, the Oz-influenced cadences of Eric Jacobson – given the unenviable task of resurrecting Miss Piggy and Fozzie Bear, among others – do take some getting used to.) I

would've likely been bummed if

The Muppets

went

too

snarky, or

too

sentimental, or if, God forbid, studio executives thought it would be wise to update the puppetry

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with a dash (or an onslaught) of CGI. And it probably goes without saying that if the project were shepherded by Muppet fans less devoted, and less wise, than Segel and Stoller – anyone from the Happy Madison brain trust, for instance – the results could've easily ranged from embarrassing to unwatchable.

Within the film's first few minutes, though, it's clear that Segel, Stoller, and director James Bobin absolutely *love* this franchise, and have no intention of mucking it up with a second-rate offering.

The Muppets, consequently, is a first-rate love letter to both Henson's creations and the mad Muppet devotees, myself among them, for whom these characters will always be gloriously iconic. At the screening I attended, it sounded as though the younger audience members were having a pretty great time, but no adult should feel the slightest bit silly about buying a ticket without pre-teen chaperones. After all, it wasn't kids' laughter I heard during the movie's most satisfyingly self-referential punchlines, or kids' sniffles I registered when Kermit the Frog and the whole Muppet gang gathered for a moving rendition of "The Rainbow Connection."

In the film, the Muppets, having disbanded years ago, decide to reunite for a fundraising performance *à la* the Judy-and-Mickey "Let's put on a show!" musicals of the 1930s. (A point underscored by, I kid you not, the appearance of Mickey Rooney himself.) Along the way, there's some romantic tension between the ever-chipper Gary (Segel) and – after 10 years of dating with no engagement ring – his increasingly agitated girlfriend Mary (Amy Adams); an understandable identity crisis involving Segel's starstruck Muppet brother Walter (voiced by Peter Linz); and a series of evil machinations initiated by oil tycoon Tex Richman (Chris Cooper). Yet as hoped for, the storylines here are merely excuses for a ceaseless parade of verbal and visual gags, genial and clever musical numbers, goofy and unexpected celebrity cameos (the arrival of Jim Parsons, I thought, was especially priceless), and an overall spirit that boasts exactly the right balance between grown-up wit and childlike wonder. Barring the occasional, hardly vexing bummer – I can't be the only one who wished for a somewhat less grating celebrity host for the climactic fundraiser – *The Muppets'* filmmakers did this thing just right.

Unfortunately, to discuss much of what makes *The Muppets* so wonderful is to potentially ruin its greatest bits. The previews had prepared me for the inspired "traveling by map" routine that gets our heroes from California to France in a matter of seconds, but I was glad that the genius of Cooper's maniacal laugh, at least, wasn't spoiled for me in advance. So rather than expounding on Fozzie's nightclub act in Reno, or Alan Arkin's grousing as a jaded tour guide, or the choice of musical number by Gonzo's longtime chicken companion Camilla (hint: the first word of the hit song's title rhymes with "cluck"), let me instead reference the hilarity, charm, and surprisingly deep emotionalism of just one late-film scene.

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In it, Walter finally discovers his long-dormant Muppet talent during his first live performance, and at first, you laugh because Walter's particular gift seems inconsequential and silly. But as the sequence nears its completion, you begin to acknowledge the great beauty and intense difficulty in what Walter is doing, and by the time this wonderfully funny, earnest character finishes his act, you – like the on-screen audience he's performing for – may also feel like standing and cheering, and maybe wiping away a tear. And that, in a nutshell, is *The Muppets*. As the end credits rolled, with Muppets and humans alike mugging to the infectious, peppy joy of (what else?) "Mah Ná Mah Ná," I didn't want to thank Segel, Stoller, and Bobin for their work so much as hug the living daylights out of them.



HUGO

When I attended a recent screening of *Happy Feet Two*, it was preceded by a preview for Martin Scorsese's *Hugo*. And I can only assume that when the trailer ended, and a nearby patron, quite loudly, decreed, "Martin Scorsese has lost his mind," the sentiment was uttered because

Hugo

seemed such a radical, potentially ill-fitting, and possibly money-grubbing departure for its director. ("A children's movie?" you can hear the faithful cry. "In

3D

?!?) What's the world

coming

to?!?) Allow me a moment, then, to assuage the fears of that irked gentleman and anyone else who might roll their eyes at the thought of a kid-friendly Scorsese with a 3D surcharge: The movie is an exceptional achievement, and all the more so for its director having made a gripping, visually breathtaking, emotionally resonant family entertainment about

film preservation

, for Pete's sake.

Set in a bustling Paris railroad station in the 1930s, and concerning a young orphan (the empathetic, grave Asa Butterfield) who grows fascinated with the works and presence of

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legendary film pioneer George Méliès (a splendidly touching, effective Ben Kingsley), *Hugo*, at roughly 130 minutes, ran a bit long for my tastes. That's pretty much the only complaint I can make about it. With its genius-level production design at every turn, Scorsese and his wildly gifted collaborators have crafted a work of such period specificity and mesmerizing mechanical detail that it might be the finest argument for 3D that the movies have yet provided; you're wholly, thrillingly transported to its world of steam-filled terminals and metal stairways and gloomy catacombs. (Visiting Hugo's murky train-station dwelling for the first time, Chloë Grace Moretz's Isabelle exclaims, "I feel like Jean Valjean!") In his role as an officious, comically threatening station agent, Sacha Baron Cohen delivers some much-welcome slapstick, with his mechanical-leg shtick an apparent nod to Kenneth Mars in

Young Frankenstein.

Yet beyond

Hugo

's beauty and its chuckles, Scorsese and his top-tier actors – working from a smartly structured John Logan script based on Brian Selznick's

The Invention of Hugo Cabret –

have also fashioned a loving, graceful, and remarkably vivid elegy for celluloid, and for those feelings of utter, magical rapture that occur when you're in thrall to a film that quite simply knocks your socks off. I'm betting that for many, especially the film lovers in attendance,

Hugo

itself might just be one.

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