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ICE AGE: CONTINENTAL DRIFT

With *Ice Age: Continental Drift*, we are now four movies into the apparently never-ending 20th Century Fox franchise, and it might finally be time to ask: Has there ever been a less animated animated lead than Ray Romano's woolly mammoth Manny?

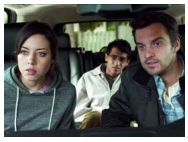
Part of this character's problem, it seems to me, lies in simple Straight-Man(ny) Syndrome: Playing ringleader to a bunch of more physically and vocally manic buffoons in this Pleistocene-era comedy series, Romano's mammoth is consequently stuck with most of its dullest dialogue and storylines. (*Continental Drift* finds Manny, having wound up adrift in the ocean, desperate to return home and mend his relationship with his adolescent daughter.) A larger part has to do with the mere casting of Romano – a gifted comedian, yes, but one whose every over-familiar, soporific reading sounds like it's being delivered through a deep yawn.

But boy oh boy is this creature uninteresting to *look* at. Animated so that he's routinely seen face-front, Manny's enormous proboscis (like those of
Ice Age
's fellow mammoth figures) almost completely masks his mouth, making it appear as though he's speaking telepathically, and his cross-eyed stare is intensely off-putting; you feel cross-eyed just watching him. The plush, lumbering character is drawn well enough, and as he resembles the world's largest carnival-game prize, it's easy to see what the littlest of kids find adorable about this animated Snuffleupagus. For this adult, though, Manny is tiresome both

aurally and visually, thereby proving all-too-perfect a protagonist for what has become an increasingly tiresome family-film enterprise.

Heaven knows there's a lot of *stuff* going on in this third sequel – pirate attacks, siren calls, Scrat pursuing his ever-elusive acorn. But nothing about the movie feels freshly imagined or dramatically vital, the action scenes and comic gambits feel like (frozen) leftovers from far better works, and even the shrillest of voice-over performances, such as those of John Leguizamo and Wanda Sykes, feel phoned-in here. What's the point in hiring talents as diverse as Aziz Ansari, Peter Dinklage, Nick Frost, Jennifer Lopez, Simon Pegg, Queen Latifah, Seann William Scott, Patrick Stewart, and Alan Tudyk if they're going to sound this interchangeable? (Denis Leary seems particularly disengaged as the grumpy saber-toothed tiger Diego, and I wanted to weep for the actor when, during the end credits, we briefly saw him grimacing his way through the cast recording of an awful pop number; Leary's pained expression said more about the *Continental Drift* experience than any review possibly could.) Yet for as little fun as I had at my screening of this latest *Ice Age*, it turns out that I wouldn't have missed it for anything, because its first five minutes are damned near extraordinary. Not coincidentally, they have nothing to do with *Ice Age*.

If you want to understand everything that's missing from *Continental Drift*, all you have to do is watch the movie's prelude – a new, brilliant Simpsons short titled "The Longest Daycare," in which the infant Maggie tussles with her fiendish, unibrow-ed nemesis at the Ayn Rand School for Tots. Boasting ingeniously orchestrated slapstick, exquisite visual gags (the Raggedy Ayn Rand dolls were an especially fine touch, as was the day-care's welcome sign "Your freedom assured by our probing"), sublime music cues (*Pagliacci*!), and a narrative both involving and, in the end, surprisingly touching, the short is an unintentional rebuke to the generic, contract-obligation blandness of the feature presentation. It's also something that you too often wish *Continental Drift* itself was: blessedly free of dialogue. A decade into its run, the *Ice Age* franchise may finally be completely out of stream. A quarter-century into *its* run, *The Simpsons* steadfastly refuses to be anything less than *eh-h-h-h-h-h-*xcellent.



SAFETY NOT GUARANTEED

Aubrey Plaza's grim-faced deadpan and sandpaper-dry readings on TV's *Parks & Recreation* are things of comic beauty, especially in those rare moments right before they give way to expressions of genuine happiness. (Acting opposite Amy Poehler and Chris Pratt, it's hard to imagine anyone staying sour for terribly long.) Until director Colin Trevorrow's indie comedy *Safety Not Guaranteed,* however, I'd never imagined that Plaza's specific gifts could be so successfully employed for the duration of an entire feature film. Man, are they *ever*. Playing a dissatisfied, mildly depressed magazine intern investigating the author of a mysterious want ad – one requesting a companion for a risky experiment in time-travel – Plaza lends the film her trademark, downbeat wit, and her dead-eyed incredulity and withering yet seemingly accidental sarcasm are oftentimes laugh-out-loud funny. Yet she also brings to the film curiosity and poignancy and an unanticipated amount of emotional accessibility, and her scenes with Mark Duplass' sweet-natured but obviously damaged time-machine inventor are minor miracles of tentative connection; these two lost souls advance and retreat with a wary warmth that feels absolutely genuine. A few of the film's diversions, including the arrival of a pair of potential government spooks, are too sketchy for comfort, and much of screenwriter Derek Connolly's dialogue is too self-consciously cute in the style of Diablo Cody. ("How do I *eject*?" asks Plaza during an uncomfortable conversation with screen dad Jeff Garlin.) But with the wonderful Jake M. Johnson cast in a rather trenchant parallel narrative involving a conceited jerk seeking his own personal form of time travel, *Safety Not Guaranteed* is a lovely, spirited, lightly profound entertainment, with a finale that will likely enrage some viewers while exhilarating others. Either way, they'll be talking about it, and considering how few summer movies feature endings worth discussing at *all*, that's high praise right there.

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