

'The Art of Racing in the Rain' spins its wheels in melodrama

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «« out of «««««

Running Time: 109 minutes

It seems like there has become a whole separate genre of tear-jerker melodramas devoted to pooches and their influence in our lives. *Marley & Me* is an obvious example, and in the years following, we've gotten titles like *Red Dog* (which I admit, actually worked on me), *A Dog's Purpose* and *A Dog's Journey* among many, many others. These movies aren't exactly subtle and almost seem to revel in their emotional manipulations, doing everything they can to try and eke sniffles out of viewers. Based on the novel by Garth Stein, *The Art of Racing in the Rain* follows this trend, abandoning every ounce of subtlety.

Denny Swift (Milo Ventimiglia) yearns to be a Formula One driver and spends all of his free time working toward that goal. He finds a kindred spirit in a puppy he names Enzo (voiced by Kevin Costner). The dog narrates his life with his master, following the man as he tries to juggle a

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career and a family with wife Eve (Amanda Seyfried). Of course, tragedy strikes at various intervals, resulting in hardships and suffering for both Denny and the pooch. Enzo details these problems with an unending series of eye-rolling racing metaphors that more or less teach his owner to focus on the immediate moment and never give up on his aspirations.

As you might have expected, the golden retriever featured is ridiculously cute. It's a nicely photographed film that mostly consists of Enzo and his family staring contemplatively into the camera while numerous voice-overs describe the ups and (mostly) incredible downs that befall the family. Obviously, Costner is a huge star and it's understandable why he might have been chosen to voice the dog. However, it is odd for his gravelly voice to accompany a cute little puppy. Even as the animal grows, this reviewer wasn't sure if the intonation fit Enzo's personality. And what the actor is given to say doesn't help matters. As written, the dog is given anthropomorphic qualities, and interactions with his master come across as forced at the best of times, and pure schmaltz at their worst.

The movie does attempt to insert a little bit of humor here and there, although it could certainly have done with much more. One series of running gags involving a stuffed zebra that becomes Enzo's nemesis, does earn a chuckle. But for the most part, the story squarely focuses on the family melodrama. There will be no surprises for audiences, as Denny struggles to get along with his in-laws (Kathy Baker and Martin Donovan) and things quickly turn ugly. Later sections of the feature are delivered with the subtlety of a two-by-four coming down over the head repeatedly. As such, the important emotional revelations don't make an impact and feel obvious in their manipulations.

The golden retriever looks adorable and the talented human cast members do what they can to make the most of an overpoweringly sentimental screenplay, but it feels like a movie that's trying far too hard to simply make viewers weep. In the end, the results are so artificial that this reviewer would have had an easier time with the story had the dog actually learned to drive and race cars - I would have bought into it more than the actual feature's final moments. As it stands, *The Art of Racing in the Rain* spins its wheels, but finds itself unable to pull itself out of a sinkhole of melodrama.

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