

'The Bad Guys' con viewers out of their precious time

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

out of «««««

Running Time: 100 minutes

This feature from DreamWorks Animation and Universal Pictures opens in cinemas on April 22.

While Pixar and Disney are well known as trailblazers when it comes to animated family fare, many forget that DreamWorks have made their fair share of memorable features.

In fact, their productions have included the likes of the "Shrek," "Kung Fu Panda," "How to Train Your Dragon," "The Boss Baby," and "Trolls," movie franchises, not to mention the very underrated "Mr. Peabody and Sherman". The company's latest feature is "The Bad Guys" that is based on the bestselling book series by Aaron Blabey.

This tale is set in a Los Angeles where humans and anthropomorphic animals coexist. Wolf (Sam Rockwell), Snake (Marc Maron), Piranha (Anthony Ramos), Shark (Craig Robinson) and Tarantula (Awkwafina) make up the titular group of criminals, known for their impressive thefts

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that continually embarrass the Chief of Police (Alex Borstein) and officers around the city.

However, when their latest heist goes awry, Mr. Wolf is forced to make a deal with new governor and fox Diane Foxington (Zazie Beetz) and guinea pig Professor Rupert Marmalade (Richard Ayoade) to reform his entire gang. The wolf initially considers this another con, but suddenly experiences strange sensations while doing good... feelings of happiness and pride that add serious complications to his grand plans.

This reviewer has never read the source material, but the movie does have an unusual and stylized visual approach to the characters that likely emulates the source material. They have large eyes and, depending on the angle, at times look like they've been drawn almost like a picture from a kid's book.

When the feature is focused on dialogue exchanges between Wolf and Foxington with little going on around them, the movie doesn't look as striking as one might hope for. However, the technique is more effectively utilized during chase and heist scenes when the oddballs are being pursued through the streets.

As one might have already guessed, the main theme of the picture is not to judge or make assumptions about an individual based on their outward appearance. It also tackles reform, redemption and the benefits of doing the right thing, no matter what the personal cost. It seems the heart of the story is the relationship between Wolf and Snake. The conflict that builds between them as the central protagonist begins to feel a need to help others instead of simply hurting (or consuming) them is an interesting one.

The film's voice cast also gets plenty of comic mileage out of the concept, contrasting their nefarious personalities with being forced to do something sweet and selfless. And the duplicitous nature of these robbers allows for some amusing double and even triple crosses over the course of the story.

There is a funny running gag involving misadventure with an escape tool. The climax features another memorably entertaining sequence involving the reveal of an evil plot featuring a rampaging army of possessed rodents.

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But even though the movie features some genuinely funny bits, just as many of the jokes land with a thud. There are a number of gags about the shape of a valuable meteorite that aren't as cleverly written and will only get giggles from the youngest of viewers.

It was very strange to this reviewer that the story introduces L.A. as home to anthropomorphic animals and then only shows a grand total of seven of these individuals over the entire running time. Everyone else in the story is human. The film would have been more visually interesting had there been other animal characters in the story and appearing in the backgrounds.

Admittedly, it's nice to see a kid's flick with story twists, as well as characters struggling with biases from others based on their reputations. It's just unfortunate that the screenplay doesn't maximize the comedic potential of the concept.

This film could have benefitted from a sharper and more biting wit, rather than resorting to broad jokes on the dimmer characters or gags about derrieres. "The Bad Guys" is a reasonably entertaining family feature, but one that is unlikely to leave as lasting an impression as other classic DreamWorks titles.

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