

Brigsby Bear

This offbeat comedy-drama from the mind of Kyle Mooney, currently a cast member of “Saturday Night Live,” is a mix of twee, disquieting, and dorky, but it ultimately resonates with real sincerity and sentiment. At its best, it is ineluctably sweet.

James (Mooney) is a 25-year-old man whose whole life revolves around videos of a cheesy TV show called “Brigsby Bear,” starring a figure in a giant bear’s head who rights wrongs in some imaginary sci-fi world with the aid of a pair of twin girls (the filmmakers admit that their creation takes off from the 1980’s popular kiddie bear named Teddy Ruxpin). The show, viewed on grainy, old VHS tapes, is James’ whole life because he was abducted as an infant by a pair of fake parents Ted and April (Mark Hamill and Jane Adams) and has been raised in an underground bunker being force-fed this show (his “parents” claim the outside world is toxic). When the authorities finally invade the bunker and apprehend the miscreants, James is saved by the police--bonding with Det. Vogel (Greg Kinnear)--then placed into the hands of his real parents, Greg and Louise Pope (Matt Walsh and Michaela Watkins) well-meaning souls who know nothing of his fantasy life.

The humor and the pathos of the film stems from the classic fish-out-of-water premise as James, whose every reference is to his nutty TV show, tries to navigate a wider world where absolutely everything has to be learned anew. This makes for poignant scenes with his real parents (played absolutely straight and not as clueless dummies), testy ones with his hostile younger sister Aubrey (Ryan Simpson), plus awkward ones with his sister’s cool teen crowd. One thing James has going for him, though, is that he has native smarts and proves supremely adaptable. Far from being cowed or overwhelmed by the outside world and its chaos (like the poor little Jack in 2005’s “Room”), he easily absorbs the catch phrases and mores of his new environment while never forgoing his immersion in “Brigsby.” While a comedy at its base, “Brigsby Bear” contains moving moments also. His halting adjustments to life constitute not so much a “Revenge of the Nerds,” as a Triumph of a Nerd.

Mooney, the SNLer with the shaggy mop and turned-up brows, wrote the book for the film and conceived the project with old buddies Dave McCary (who directs) and Kevin Costello (who co-wrote the screenplay). He stars as James and, in his full-on commitment to his character, makes what could have been a tedious geek into an appealing man-child. His “Brigsby” fixation at first alienates him from newfound family and friends and even leads to his brief confinement at a mental clinic (little comedy here). Still, his unquenchable spirit eventually comes to redound to his benefit as all recognize his earnestness and come to work with him to craft his own idiosyncratic movie with him starring as the bear character himself. For this redemptive film, he even enlists fake father Ted, now imprisoned, to do voices for the new Brigsby.

“Brigsby Bear” is hardly a masterpiece. There are clichés: the hostile teen personified by dour Aubrey, the overused trope of a kids’ party going sour *in loco parentis*, some cornball exchanges...other minor missteps. But what makes it work overall is the childlike honesty of James’ obsession, by turns dark and unsettling, touching and giddy.

(The film is rated "PG-13" and runs 100 minutes.)

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