

Movie Review: 'Martian Child'

by David_Elliott

When is John Cusack not credible? Never putting forward a foot wrong, even when a script goes squish, Cusack is one of the sure resources modern directors have learned to rely on.

'MARTIAN CHILD' - Amanda Peet, Bobby Coleman and John Cusack start to form a family connection in the intimately dramatized 'Martian Child.' CNS Photo by Alan Markfield. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) In "Martian Child" Cusack has an amiably engaging if not easy role, playing David Gordon. He's a fantasy novelist with a fine modernist house as proof of success, but also a widower who hopes adoption might fill the void.

He can tap into young imagination, but his fictions are not quite enough. It's the child within (backed by Cusack's looks, still boyish at 41) that make him open to adopting Dennis, not a menace but a "weirdo" to other kids at the orphanage.

Dennis has his own sci-fi slant. Parents gone, he believes he's from Mars. He has spaced lingo and his spacesuit is a large cardboard box. He looks upon the world through a slit, fearing sunlight and wearing a weighted belt to hold him down on Earth (never mind that Mars has less gravity).

As Dennis, Bobby Coleman doesn't reek cutely of "natural," which saves him from the niche of posing as the new Macaulay Culkin or Dakota Fanning prodigy. But his expressive face often has the aura of a serious, little old man (or, in white sunscreen, a little old mime). Since Cusack can still seem young, the two become a matched pair, bonding through situations devised by supple, not too corny writers.

Cusack's sister Joan, whose floppy-toy gestures and facial moves can make her seem from her own planet, plays David's sister. Amanda Peet also helps, Oliver Platt lends his benign bulk to being David's agent, and Anjelica Huston cameos as the big-deal editor who figures David might be the new J.K. Rowling; she may be spoofing Tina Brown.

Yes, product plugs for a top cereal are blatant, stuff with an old dog is a shade too darling, the ending is a lean offshoot of "Rebel Without a Cause." But kids from 7 to 12 get so few entertaining movies these days that it would be small-minded to quibble apart this honest and well-made charmer.

Director Menno Meyjes managed to balance Cusack with a Hitler figure in "Max." His planned films on bullfighter Manolete and photographer Robert Capa will surely have more weight, yet probably won't float with this Martian gravity.

A New Line Cinema release. Director: Menno Meyjes. Writers: Seth Bass, Jonathan Tolins. Cast: John Cusack, Bobby Coleman, Amanda Peet, Joan Cusack, Oliver Platt, Anjelica Huston. Running time: 1 hour, 33 minutes. Rated PG. 3 stars.

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