

Movie Review: 'Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium'

by *David_Elliott*

"Quirk's not a sparkle."

Weigh that dialogue line and you've got the floaty heft of "Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium." The quirky movie often sparkles, and as Mr. Magorium, maybe this era's Mr. Magoo, there is Dustin Hoffman.

'MR. MAGORIUM'S WONDER EMPORIUM' - Dustin Hoffman hams it up as the owner of a magical shop in 'Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium.' CNS Photo courtesy of Fox Walden. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Hoffman was hammily the best thing in "Perfume," the oddball fantasy thing of last year's holiday season. Nobody his age (and few younger) brings more crafty zeal to show-biz. And here is Hoffman with a stack of Quentin Crisp hair, bunny teeth and a voice somewhere between Elmer Fudd and Steven Spielberg.

He owns and empowers the magical shop, an old cutie set between Manhattan high-rises. Toys, games and stuffed critters are way beyond interactive. Playing is much more important than selling, and the bottom line is so far down that a stuffy accountant (Jason Bateman), whose humorless suited-ness gets him named "Mutant," can barely account the wonders.

Why an inventory count? Because Magorium, spry as a chipmunk but 234, is planning to exit ("Light bulbs die, my sweet. I will depart"). The cozy empire may come to his lovable but uneasy assistant, Molly, a former piano prodigy played with sweetness and very boyish hair by Natalie Portman.

Zach Helm, who helmed this show, having first contrived its story soon after college, pours his devotion into it with some taste. The movie is excitingly designed, starting with terrific cartoon titles, and is crazed for colors (even a hospital sequence is cheered by preeningly primal white and yellow). As you settle in (if not, depart), you should enjoy how demure the product plugs are, even the cameo by Kermit the Frog. There is the sheer fun of the store, its come-alive toys, and Hoffman going from "Drat!" to a heartfelt little homage to Shakespeare; he even bounces a joke riff off O'Neill's "Mourning Becomes Electra."

Kids who miss that touch can enjoy a lot else, like the impish dance on bubble-wrap in Central Park. "Anything can happen" is the idea, but the movie's charm insurance is that not too much does. Modest in scale, true in aim, this isn't a groany budget bulldozer like "Toys" or "Scrooged."

As story mascot there is adorable but not overbearing Zach Mills. For some reason this wry charmer lacks friends his own age. Call that a quirk, or a quark, or just a stray quiff of pathos.

Get into the right and light holiday spirit, and you should be pleased. As always, the call is yours.

A 20th Century Fox release. Director, writer: Zach Helm. Cast: Dustin Hoffman, Natalie Portman, Zach Mills, Jason Bateman. Running time: 1 hour, 32 minutes. Rated G. 3 stars.

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