

Movie Review: 'Son of Rambow'

by Zachary Woodruff

The first thing to know about "Son of Rambow": It has about as much to do with Rambo as Dirty Harry does with "Harry Potter" or as Rocky Balboa does with flying squirrels. The second thing to know about "Son of Rambow": It recalls so many other films, you can count the cultural footnotes on your fingers and tributes on your toes.

'SON OF RAMBOW' - Jules Sitruk, middle, stars in the comedy/drama 'Son of Rambow.' CNS Photo courtesy of Maggie Ferreira. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Set in the early 1980s but shot with the earth-toned elegance of the 1950s, "Son of Rambow" follows an unlikely friendship between two British boys. Perched on the edge of prepubescent innocence, they attend a school where the girls tower above them like trees in uniforms.

Carter (Will Poulter) is a crew-cut bully who resembles River Phoenix's misunderstood delinquent in "Stand by Me." Will (Bill Milner) is a religious recluse like the soulful Amish boy from "Witness." Their mildly abusive relationship recalls Rizzo leading Joe Buck astray in "Midnight Cowboy."

When Will sees a video of "Rambo: First Blood" that Carter has bootlegged from the local cinema, it unleashes Will's fertile imagination - depicted in explosively intricate animated sequences reminiscent of early Tim Burton films like "Pee-wee's Big Adventure."

A conflict arises because Will's widowed mom belongs to a small-town sect that forbids exposure to TV, movies and pop culture - a la "Footloose." Carter has his own family problems in the form of an indifferent big brother, who bows to peer pressure like the villain from a John Hughes teen drama.

The bulk of "Son of Rambow" mirthfully depicts the boys' growing friendship after Carter enlists Will to be the stuntman in a shot-by-shot video remake of "First Blood" he's making for a competitive contest on BBC television. The boys cleverly re-enact action-movie scenes using whatever props they can shoplift, nursing-home residents they can squeeze into supporting roles or abandoned power plants they can use as sets.

Writer-director Garth Jennings says he based "Son of Rambow" on his own childhood filmmaking experiences, but it's tempting to compare it to "Raiders of the Lost Ark: The Adaptation," an actual shot-by-shot recreation painstakingly made by American children during the 1980s. Last year's "Be Kind Rewind" isn't too far off either.

Of course, "Son of Rambow's" young target audience won't pick up on any of these references. Instead, they'll laugh at the film's relentless slapstick, which affects an oblivious deadpan tone identical to "Napoleon Dynamite." Some of the kid-stunt scenes are so offhandedly violent - yet without violent consequences - that the film should come with a "Jackass"-style warning: Do not try this at home.

"Son of Rambow" ups the quirk factor when it brings in a group of French foreign-exchange students led by the androgynous Didier Revolve (Jules Sitruk). Cooler than Serge Gainsbourg, he develops a fawning entourage and introduces them to the joys of headbands, asymmetrical hair and Pop Rocks with a Coca-Cola chaser.

A school-dance scene culminates with the teens, not yet old enough for love, hopping playfully en masse to the Siouxsie & the Banshees song "Peek-a-Boo." The depiction is a sweet window into Jennings' personal nostalgia. Or is he trying to introduce the next generation of emo kids to the retro merits of 1980s new wave?

That's the problem with "Son of Rambow": What is it, exactly? At first, its pastiche of styles creates a dazzling buzz, but the film's subversive promise eventually curdles into dramatic doldrums. Will and Carter are treated like human cartoons for so long, it becomes difficult to take their problems seriously in the final, sappy stretch. Imagine watching Tom & Jerry beat each other with mallets as a prelude to confronting their dysfunctional family lives.

At this point, you may be wondering: Does the reference-heavy "Son of Rambow" conclude with a character tearfully and cathartically viewing the completed film, just like in "Cinema Paradiso"? Does Rambo wear a funny headband?

"Son of Rambow." Running time: 1 hour, 36 minutes. Rated: PG-13. 2 1/2 stars.

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