

Movie Review: 'Great Buck Howard' a great showcase for Malkovich

by Lee Grant

"The Great Buck Howard" is pretty great, a prickly slice of show-business landscape featuring a crafty, collected John Malkovich.

RATINGS GUIDE:

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) He plays a mentalist (don't call him "magician") not unlike The Amazing Kreskin, who's seen better days ("61 appearances on 'The Tonight Show With Johnny Carson,' but not once in the last 10 years").

Older now and struggling, he's still on the road schlepping into faded auditoriums in places like Stockton, Calif., and Bakersfield, Calif., greeting folks with a signature, "I love this town!"

This tough tier of entertainment is observed compassionately by director Sean McGinly, who worked for Kreskin and the superb cinematographer Tak Fujimoto.

A moment that lingers: Backstage in one of the small towns, Jack Carter, 85, a veteran opening act, is expressing gratitude to Buck for including him on the bill. Laments the Catskills comedian, "I want to thank you for calling me. No one calls me anymore."

Meanwhile, Colin Hanks as Troy (McGinly attended USC) drops out of law school with dreams of becoming a writer and lands a job as road manager for the full-of-himself Buck. Dad (real-life dad Tom Hanks) has moments as a disappointed parent.

If there's a D-list in Hollywood, entertainers like Buck Howard are on it. They trudge valiantly solo through small-town America, hanging on precariously to former notability. It's glorious watching John Malkovich, the actor, transform into "The Great Buck Howard." He's the great John Malkovich.

"The Great Buck Howard." Rated: PG. Running time: 1 hour, 27 minutes. 3 stars.

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