Movie Review: 'Evan Almighty'

by David_Elliott

"Evan Almighty" is odd, as if Cecil B. DeMille and Frank Capra once got drunk over lunch, sketched silly plot notes on a napkin, and left it in a studio file where this film's makers could find it.

'EVAN ALMIGHTY' - In the comedy 'Evan Almighty,' Steve Carell plays Evan Baxter, a congressman asked to build a new ark, much as Noah did before. CNS Photo courtesy of Rhythm & Hues. Director Tom Shadyac is no Capra or DeMille, but he had a $240 million hit with 2003's "Bruce Almighty," a figure even those commercial gents would have envied. He also had Jim Carrey to star. Now he has Steve Carell, plus God.

God is Morgan Freeman, and who would dispute it? George Burns ("Oh, God!," 1977) long ago retired to Friars Club heaven. And so Freeman is free to brandish his almighty voice and lordly twinkle, telling new Congressman Evan Baxter (Carell) to build a big boat just like Noah's, blueprint from Genesis 6:14: "Make thee an ark of gopherwood; rooms shalt thou make ..."

Maybe Baxter was chosen because he's such a twitty egotist, having been elected on a pledge "to change the world," thus out-promising even Lyndon Johnson. Sure enough, a flood must come to Washington, and only Evan's ark can foil the grasping schemes of hoggish Rep. Long (John Goodman, who is like Huey Long multiplied).

The plot is more a thing of faith than works. Evan soon sprouts a biblical beard, and animals of all species appear in twosomes to line up meekly behind him, but only Evan fathoms a high purpose. Congress is invaded by birds, yet Long is not swayed. Building the ark with his sons, using antique tools, Evan draws only a crowd of snarkers egged on by Jon Stewart - where are all the Bible devouts?

OK, it's a comedy. Proof: Carell, who acts funny, reacts funny, even looks funny in a junior executive way. He seems a little lost in his white beard, not quite equal to John Huston as Noah in 1966's "The Bible: In the Beginning."

This also is a modern mall comedy. Proof: many poop gags. The punch line seems to be a TV reporter joking, "With all these species, what about the feces?" The hyenas seem amused.

Wanda Sykes, as Evan's secretary, cranks up like a solo sitcom. Goodman looms and hurls his weight. Molly Shannon perks and buzzes, Lauren Graham is Evan's worried wife, Johnny Simmons his engaging oldest son. Direction is by the book, not the Bible but a book of simple words and wide margins.

RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) But there are laughs, good effects, fine beasts and a mood of goofy apocalypse. Our national capital is flooded, though all the good stuff is left standing. The ark sweeps past Lincoln's memorial, where Abe most likely prays to Morgan Freeman.

A Universal Pictures release. Director: Tom Shadyac. Writer: Steve Oedekerk, Joel Cohen, Alec Sokolow. Cast: Steve Carell, Morgan Freeman, Lauren Graham, John Goodman, Molly Shannon, Wanda Sykes. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes. Rated PG. 2 1/2 stars.

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