

Movie Review: 'Rocket Science'

by David_Elliott

"Rocket Science" is about a New Jersey teen named Hal (not Hugh) Hefner who considers clear speech "not like rocket science" - if only he could get the phrase out of his mouth fluently.

'ROCKET SCIENCE' - Vincent Piazza, Reece Thompson and Aaron Yoo are featured in the coming-of-age drama 'Rocket Science.' CNS Photo courtesy of Jim Bridges. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Hal is more like Halt. His stuttering speech lurches and jolts from one verbal pothole to the next. The small inside joke is that the movie is from Jeffrey Blitz, who made the widely seen indie documentary "Spellbound," about kids who know very big words but spell them ve-ry s-l-o-w-l-y.

For this dramatic feature, more like a comedy when it cares to be, Blitz has not lost sympathy for kids under pressure. But the pressure here, unlike a spelling bee's ritual drill, seems both neurotic and quirkily mischievous, as if Hal's handicap were a sort of gag reflex to entertain others.

The excellent Reece Thompson plays Hal so earnestly that his shy, gentle frustration with not being fluent becomes more affectingly serious than Blitz's tone and tactics can serve. This is remarkable adolescent acting, but the film's attitudes are often just remarkably adolescent.

Hal is surrounded by the fixated: a broken pair of sad sitcom parents; a pushy brother far more sullenly alienated than himself; a school debating hero Hal idolizes (big Nicholas D'Agosto), whose speed-talk brilliance trips him into an existential value crisis; and that boy's fierce rival in competition, acted by Anna Kendrick as a sly variant on Reese Witherspoon in "Election."

Toss in idiotic speech therapists, and a loyal (to Hal) Korean kid apparently named for Charlton Heston. And repeat jokes about Hal trying to order pizza. Blitz is serving up thin, conceptual pizza, hoping for a conceptual irony akin to "Napoleon Dynamite," yet he pushes Hal deeper into the deadpan dump of New Jersey jokery.

The result has some zips, such as the wittiest use of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in a very long time. But then we get more shots of drab Jersey nowheres, or hear an adenoidal singer dropping brick lyrics like "Do you hate me as much I hate you?" or the narrator intrudes with fortune cookies like, "He was that kind of ghost, the kind that can't love again."

The fault, dear Hal, is not in your stars, nor in your vocal chords, nor even your twisted nerves. It's in the movie. The script stutters.

A Picturehouse Entertainment release. Director, writer: Jeffrey Blitz. Cast: Reece Thompson, Anna Kendrick, Nicholas D'Agosto, Margo Martindale. Running time: 1 hour, 41 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

Movie Review: 'Rocket Science' by David_Elliott