

Movie Review: 'The Heartbreak Kid'

by James Hebert

In a sensible and well-mannered universe, the things the Farrelly brothers pull in "The Heartbreak Kid" would do little but stimulate the gag reflex.

'THE HEARTBREAK KID' - Eddie (Ben Stiller) finds himself at the kids' table in a scene from 'The Heartbreak Kid.' CNS Photo by Zade Rosenthal. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Instead, the directors' gags trigger a different reflex entirely - one that may alarm your neighbors, one you may even try desperately to suppress. Let's call it "laughing."

Get friendly with it. Like the uncomfortably married couple in the movie, you two will be spending a lot of time together.

In this remake of the 1972 film, the Farrellys - proud perpetrators of "Dumb and Dumber," "There's Something About Mary" and other jolly assaults on good taste - turn Neil Simon's script inside out and flog it like a pinata.

The original (which Elaine May directed and Simon adapted from Bruce Jay Friedman's story) had a groom straying on his honeymoon. It did not have rat-based physical comedy, talk of an erotic maneuver called the "Swedish helicopter," urination as a medical procedure or an 80-year-old man in a hot tub with a naked, alarmingly inflated porn star. (So far as we can recall.)

It also did not have Ben Stiller, an actor who's the ideal foil for the Farrellys' grand carnival of indignities. Stiller does quiet exasperation like nobody's business - in fact, like nobody in the business.

He plays Eddie, a 40-ish sports-store proprietor and a guy who couldn't waffle more if he had snowshoes fused to his feet. We meet him at the wedding reception of his longtime (former) girlfriend, where the toasts are laced with jabs at Eddie's inadequacies and he is reduced to sitting at the kids' table.

Once Eddie meets the leggy Lila (Malin Akerman), though, his dad (Jerry Stiller) and best bud (a very funny Rob Corddry) goad him into going all the way with her - all the way to the altar, that is. She won't sleep with him until after the wedding. When she does, though, it's with an exhausting ferocity that just about does Eddie in.

And that's not the half of the surprises about Lila, a seeming career girl and enviro-saint who turns out to be (not to give away too much) both a good deal less and a very bad deal more.

Akerman manages the transformation from whip-smart dream-girl to witless dream-crusher so seamlessly that it almost seems two different actresses playing Lila. She's also remarkably game for bearing the brunt of

the movie's gags.

On their Cabo honeymoon, Lila hits the beach in baby oil, gets fried like a taquito and rails at the "stupid Mexican ozone." Her convalescence gives Ben time to meet Miranda (Michelle Monaghan), an earthy Southern belle visiting with her family, and begin a fling based on a big lie.

Monaghan's easy charm gives instant cred to Eddie's infatuation; she also brings much-needed sanity to this circus of neurotics.

To make things right, Eddie endures Minutemen vigilantes, killer jellyfish, a loose cannon of a "fixer" (Carlos Mencia) and a pair of meddling young twins whom Eddie memorably calls "homophobic hobbits."

David Bowie and his music thread through the movie, and when things climax with "Suffragette City," Ziggy is definitely singing the Farrellys' tune:

Wham, bam, thank you ma'am.

Directors: Bobby Farrelly, Peter Farrelly. Writers: Scot Armstrong, Leslie Dixon, Bobby Farrelly, Peter Farrelly, Kevin Barnett. Cast: Ben Stiller, Malin Akerman, Michelle Monaghan, Jerry Stiller, Rob Corddry, Carlos Mencia. Running time: 1 hour, 55 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

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