

Levinson forces whimsy in 'Toys'



JOHN MONAGHAN

If "Toys" really was a toy instead of a movie, it wouldn't be the kind of imagination-inspiring tin wind-up that the movie flounders. It would be a sleekly packaged, cheaply made plastic dodecahedron that looks great in the ads but breaks within minutes of leaving the box.

Barry Levinson's latest stars Robin Williams as a second-generation toy manufacturer at odds with his military-minded uncle. The three-star general inherits operations at Zevo Toys at his brother's deathbed and immediately starts to produce a new breed of war toys.

No ordinary G.I. Joes, these tanks, jets and helicopters carry actual explosives and can be flown via remote-control to enemy

military installations via unsuspecting kids on video games. He hopes to impress "The Washington Boys" with the concept of a cost-saving edged military.

Williams is cast as Leslie Zevo, a delightful spright in a bowler hat who refuses to grow up. He has trouble standing up to the general, however, who has no compassion for the company's credo that toys should inspire kids to create and not destroy.

The comedian is surprisingly restrained here, wisely realizing that what this movie doesn't need is more flamboyance. He does get wound up once in awhile, with his best moments coming in asides, including one about "F.A.O. Schwartzkopf" when he witnesses the deadly potential of his uncle's arsenal.

Good must triumph over evil, but a climactic battle between wind-up toys and the military ones is pathetically done, flying in a grainy, slow-motion effect that might have been effective in

a real war movie but not here. As with most of "Toys," I was embarrassed for almost everyone involved.

And there is talent here. As Williams' sister, Joan Cusack works in the paper doll department and insists on modeling life-size versions of her designs. Her dresses have flat fronts and backs, with square fold-over tabs peeking up from the shoulders. But even her good work is throttled by the heavy hand of writer/director Levinson.

Levinson is one of Hollywood's most popular directors, but you have to go back 10 years to "Diner" to find a film that really accomplishes what it set out to do (yes, I've seen "Rain Man.")

There's nothing worse than forced whimsy, except for maybe preachy forced whimsy. Levinson blamed television for the breakdown of the American family in a grainy, slow-motion effect that might have been effective in

delivered with all the subtlety of a Sherman tank.

He has compiled a film with top-notch designers, technicians and actors, but he doesn't have a vision strong enough to bind it all together. The costumes and set design are imaginative in the film's opening Christmas pageant, with kids dressed up like tree ornaments and gingerbread men, but you can't help waiting for something irreverent to chop through all that goody frosting.

Simply put, Levinson doesn't have the touch. He doesn't know when to just plain shut up already. I hope there aren't many gifts like "Toys" underneath his Christmas tree.

If you have a comment, question or suggestion, write to: John Monaghan, Street Scene, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150, or call him at 953-2047, mailbox number 1866, on a touch-tone phone.



Never grow up: Robin Williams plays Leslie Zevo, a second-generation toy manufacturer at odds with his military-minded uncle, in "Toys."

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