

MOVIES

Sluggish 'Dumbo Drop' has entertaining moments

BY PATRICIA BIRNEY
AP NEWS FEATURES

"Operation Dumbo Drop," inspired by a true story about the Army's delivery of an elephant to a remote Vietnamese village, is much like riding a pachyderm itself: It's mostly entertaining, but a little sluggish.

The film works primarily by stringing together great sight gags: an 8,000-pound elephant on the stern of a boat, on the flatbed of a truck and, ultimately, plummeting through the air with a jumbo-size parachute.

They make for nothing short of an extended sequelathon that kids will adore.

Trouble is, the road that takes the animal to the village extends too far during the last half of the film, bogging down the movie. The trek seems tedious and exhausting. When the payoff finally does come — the pulse-pounding scene of the elephant skydiving — it serves mainly as a relief.

The story of "Operation Dumbo Drop" comes from Green Beret Jim Morris, who served as a military information officer in Vietnam in 1968.

The mission had five Green Berets escorting an elephant named Bot-Tat through rugged jungle terrain to get it to a village in time for a sacred cremation rite. The trip is made more treacherous by the ever-present threat of enemy fire.

It is headed by Capt. Sam Cahill (Danny Glover), an earnest soldier who wants to do "one good thing" while in Vietnam. He's assisted by no-nonsense Capt. T.C. Doyle (the wonderfully steely-eyed Ray Liotta).

They recruit three oddball soldiers: Harvey "H.A." Ashford (Doug E. Doug), the super-superstitious class clown with "Stop! Don't Shoot! I'm Short" scrawled on his helmet; farmboy innocent Lawrence Farley (Corin Nemec); and hustler extraordinaire David Poole (Denis Leary), a guy who goes around with fake Top Secret letters signed by Gen. Westmoreland that he uses to get anything from anyone.

Along with the elephant, they pick up an orphaned Vietnamese boy named Linh, played with winning sweetness by 13-year-old Dinh Thien Le, who cares for the animal. The six make for a fun gang as they fumble and bumble through this generally innocuous adventure.

Besides the pacing problems, however, the film falters by including two scenes involving the elephant that seem gratuitous and juvenile — one that has Capt. Doyle giving Bot-Tat a huge rectal suppository and the other a graphic shot of elephant vomit.



Leap of faith: Bot-Tat (Tai) the elephant makes a dramatic parachute jump to a waiting village in Vietnam in the comedy/adventure "Operation Dumbo Drop."

With so many other ways to play upon the humorous potential of traveling with this gigantic beast, those two shots take the cheap, low road.

The movie also subtly patronizes the villagers. Early on, Cahill educates Doyle on the ways of the Montagnard people. He tells them they have a solemn wine ceremony to celebrate the arrival of a dignitary.

They also have a wine ceremony to celebrate the arrival of Tuesday, too," he adds with embarrassing Yankee condescension.

It doesn't help that Linh speaks of himself in the third person. "Linh go, too?" he asks. This stereotype has to be one of Hollywood's favorite ways to telegraph "foreignness" to the audience.

But none of this completely overshadows the entertainment value of "Operation Dumbo Drop." Rather, it makes what could have been a solid film about travels with a wild beast into something more pedestrian and tame.

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