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Marlee Matlin's new film fails to pull itself together

The movie "What the #\$! Do We Know?" starts with a good idea, but ends with a movie that just falls apart

By Ryan Nyburg
Senior Pulse Reporter

To simply describe the film "What the #\$! Do We Know?" would probably make it sound like something new and interesting, which would be an injustice seeing as it is neither.

The film deals with big ideas about quantum physics and human emotional responses by having a collection of experts comment on them, while at the same time expressing the ideas through a narrative about a deaf professional photographer with relationship problems.

This concept sounds intriguing, but it is essentially the same format used by nature documentaries and the kinds of educational films high school students across the country have to slog through in health classes. While the film is able to drum up some interest simply from the weight of its topics, it is unable to maintain this level of engagement for very long and eventually loses its way in

MOVIE REVIEW

muddled New Age pronouncements.

It's a disappointing end for what starts as a promising idea. We open with scenes of Amanda (played by Academy Award-winner Marlee Matlin) going about her day. The film's format is quickly established. We are soon introduced to a wide range of scientists, theologians and other specialists who act as a sort of Greek chorus for the film, talking about quantum mechanics,



Courtesy

Robert Baily Jr. and Marlee Matlin star in Matlin's film "What the #\$! Do We Know?," which opens at the Bijou Art Cinemas this Friday.

the existence of a higher power and how human emotions can affect our lives. Amanda's life acts as a case study for these topics to rest upon.

The film's problems quickly become as noticeable as its merits. The bevy of specialists are regulated to talking-head interviews sprinkled throughout the film. We don't find out until the end who any of them are, giving the topics of debate a distinct lack of credibility for most of the film's 111-minute running time. Some of them actually end up talking at length about subjects they have no certifiable expertise in, yet we are asked to take them all on faith.

The tone of the discussion is also a put-off. Many of the specialists speak of quantum theory and neurobiology as if they were lifestyles rather than sciences. This tone quickly becomes elitist, with a few of the interviewees making claims about how unfulfilled everyone's life is since they don't

understand these concepts. This insufferably preachy tone only gets worse as the film goes on and the concepts get muddled in pseudo-spiritual pronouncements. Concepts such as "positive thinking" are tossed around with little debate as to their validity. In fact, there is very little time discussing any contradictory views to the theories espoused by the talking heads. They simply present a concept then move on.

The narrative doesn't help much, since it never becomes more complex than an hour-long television drama. Matlin holds her own and hints at a character with more than three dimensions, but the rest of the cast is nothing more than placeholders for particular caricatures (the loud roommate, the demanding boss, etc.). While these people are there to support the higher concepts of the film, the audience is never given a reason to be engaged enough to care. This undermines the movie and leaves much of it adrift without an anchor.

The subsequent moral of the film is a good one, something about how if we understand our world better we will be better for it, but this gets lost in the often muddled discussion. In the end the filmmakers seemed to have too many good ideas about physics, but not enough about filmmaking.

"What the #\$! Do We Know?" is opening Friday at the Bijou Art Cinemas, located at 492 E. 13th Avenue.

Contact the senior Pulse reporter at ryanbury@dailyemerald.com.

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