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movies BY LOIS WADSWORTH



MELINDA SUE GORDON. PARAMOUNT PICTURES, 2004.

Team America: Ready to Rumble.

Who's Pulling Strings

Trey Parker and Matt Stone's action misadventure

TEAM AMERICA: WORLD POLICE:

Created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone. Directed by Parker. Written by Parker, Stone and Pam Brady. Produced by Parker, Stone and Scott Rudin. Executive producers, Scott Aversano, Anne Garefino. Cinematography, Bill Pope. Visual consultant, David Rockwell. Production design, Jim Dultz. Editor, Tom Vogt. Costumes, Karen Patch. Puppet design, Norman Tempia. Puppet producers, Charles, Stephen and Edward Chiodo. Special Effects, Joe Viskocil. Composer, Harry Gregson Williams. Paramount Pictures, 2004. R. 98 minutes.

special effects. To destroy the Panama Canal, the effects guys used 1,000 gallons of water for the flood that washes away the puppets. But because we accept the puppets as characters despite their strings showing, the film's effects have a somewhat more "realistic" look than those in the all-CGI film, *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*, which looks fake all the way, all the time.

You got yer upchuckin', creatively fuckin' puppets. You got yer patriotism hard-boiled. You got yer gay-bashing, activist-bashing, Hollywood-liberals bashing on one side, and on the other you've got yer North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il feeding Hans Blix to his pet shark.

And all the way, you've got Team America, five gung-ho fly-boys and fly-girls — Chris, Sara, Lisa, Joe and Gary — and their mentor, Spottswode. The team members suffer no regret over collateral damage to innocent citizens, the Eiffel Tower, the Sphinx or the Louvre. Team America damages the physical world more effectively than the terrorists they're after, who only destroy the Panama Canal and Mount Rushmore.

Yes, Trey Parker and Matt Stone's new film is an action misadventure, featuring wooden puppets with big heads and loosey-goosey bodies, which render them unable to walk or run realistically.

The Chiodo brothers Charles, Stephen and Edward, the go-to guys for live-action puppetry and special effects, worked closely with puppet designer, Norman Tempia. The brothers made 95 generic mechanical heads, which combined with a number of non-mechanical heads, stunt bodies, blown-up bodies — well, you get the picture. Each complete puppet stands 22 inches tall.

Karen Patch's 1/3-size costumes are both clever and practical. The puppeteers had to have quick access to the puppet's backs "to replace batteries for the Gilderfluke, a mechanism that works their features," Patch noted.

The film boasts special effects — lots of stuff gets blown up — but "almost" no CGI

These two pseudo-action movies both involve a "team" of expert fighters who go up against dedicated terrorists. Although both draw heavily on genre conventions, *Sky Captain's* human actors raise the picture's emotional stakes. On the other hand, schlock-meisters Parker and Stone are more interested in dithering between Kim Jong Il and Alec Baldwin as the target of their rage.

The filmmakers' satiric edge is very fuzzy here, and their un-ironic ambiguity confuses. They make fun of the square dudes and Barbie-dolls on Team America, but toward the end of the film they come out solidly on the characters' side. The movie's dirty rock anthem, "America, Fuck Yeah," may not get played in the Bush White House, but you better believe some of the guys and gals putting their bodies on the line in Iraq will be humming it. Catchy little tune, eh?

... this film is worth seeing if you like to watch puppets bleed, drown, vomit, get blown up or have sex.

Team America isn't pure satire, and the filmmakers' claim the film's latent conservatism is not political. Hmm... In that case, this film is worth seeing if you like to watch puppets bleed, drown, vomit, get blown up or have sex. Parker and Stone had to submit 10 cuts to the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) to get a provisional NC-17 rating upgraded to an R. I wish they'd spent as much time figuring out the real enemy as venting adolescent steam.

Now playing at Cinemark and Cinema World, *Team America* doesn't get my recommendation. But see it and decide for yourself.

EW

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