

Like its title pooch, 'Clifford' is a throwback with lots of heart

By Katie Walsh
Tribune News Service

Back in 1963, the character of Clifford (the big red dog) came into the world when a children's book editor suggested cartoonist and illustrator Norman Bridwell come up with a story to go along with one of his drawings.

Taking inspiration from his wife and daughter, Bridwell conjured Clifford, and his adventures with his faithful companion, Emily Elizabeth, have endured through a long-running series of children's books and a spinoff animated PBS series, and now, the long-gestating live-action version finally gallops into town. The result is a sweet, earnest film that doesn't traffic in snark or irony, capturing the childlike spirit that allows for the

suspension of disbelief to buy into the sight of a giant crimson Labrador tearing across Central Park after an inflatable Zorb (remember those?).

The film is directed by Walt Becker, who made his name with the Ryan Reynolds vehicle "Van Wilder" and the aging star comedies "Wild Hogs" and "Old Dogs." "Clifford" is a refreshing departure from that particular brand of smirking comedy. Written by Jay Sherick, David Ronn and Blaise Hemingway, "Clifford the Big Red Dog" has a decidedly innocent throwback appeal. The treacly score by journeyman composer John Debney is a constant reminder that this is a movie for kids, though it's not out of the realm of possibility that parents will find some enjoyment in this film as well, considering that where some

other children's movies zig into loud, wacky territory, "Clifford" zags into a register that's softer and more heartwarming. This is a film that's so guileless and well-intentioned that beating up on it would feel like, well, kicking a puppy.

It helps that the CGI Clifford's scene partner, Emily Elizabeth, is played by the preternaturally precocious actress Darby Camp, best known for her role as the wise Chloe on "Big Little Lies," in which she schooled her TV mom Reese Witherspoon on the nuances of Leon Bridges tunes. Camp is able to sell her emotional connection to the enormous scarlet pup amongst all the chaos, which keeps the movie's heart in the right place.

Emily Elizabeth is the new kid at a posh New York City private school, bullied by her class-



Paramount Pictures
Jack Whitehall stars with everyone's favorite big red dog in "Clifford."

mates, and desperately in need of a friend. When she and her ne'er-do-well uncle Casey (Jack Whitehall) come upon an animal rescue tent run by a magical Mr. Bridwell (John Cleese), she's immediately taken with a tiny vermilion pup. Despite Casey's protestations, the dog somehow ends up in her backpack, and when Clifford blows up to elephantine proportions, it sets off a series of wild adventures through the city. Emily and Casey try to track down Bridwell with Clifford in tow, while a scheming genetics entrepreneur (Tony Hale) takes off in hot pursuit of the colossal carmine canine and his unique DNA.

"Clifford" doesn't force too many jokes, but it has enough genuinely funny actors on board (including a who's who of "Satur-

day Night Live" players) to keep things weirdly amusing around the edges. Filling out the smaller roles with the likes of David Alan Grier, Rosie Perez, Tovah Felshuh, Siobahn Fallon Hogan, Alex Moffat, Horatio Sanz, et al., helps make this a funnier movie than expected. The biggest laughs come from a scene where Kenan Thompson, playing a bewildered veterinarian, bemusedly attempts to examine the prodigious pooch.

With a surprisingly progressive message about a tight-knit community protecting one of their own against tech disruption and aggressive policing, "Clifford the Big Red Dog" bears a sly and incisive message within this cute tale for kids (Clifford's large ruby tail is pretty cute too).

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