



February 19, 2008

A Plumm Summer

A Home Team, Fairplay Pictures production. Produced by Frank Antonelli, Caroline Zelder. Executive producers, Scott Erickson, Lisa Guerrero. Co-producer, Doug Metzger. Directed by Caroline Zelder. Screenplay, Zelder, Antonelli, T.J. Lynch.

With: William Baldwin, Lisa Guerrero, Owen Pearce, Chris J. Kelly, Henry Winkler, Brenda Strong, Peter Scolari, Rick Overton, Morgan Flynn, Jeff Daniels.

By LAEL LOEWENSTEIN

An amiable retro feel permeates "A Plumm Summer," and it's not just because this family film is set 40 years in the past. Montana-set, reality-inspired pic feels like an homage to a bygone era of moviemaking: It takes its time to build character and story, there's hardly a CG effect in sight, and there's nothing high-concept about it. Latter fact reps a significant though not insurmountable marketing hurdle. Expect, at least in the short term, continued fest appearances, where pic has been an audience favorite. DVD prospects, thanks to a recognizable cast, look sunny.

Imagine a local version of "Sesame Street" where Elmo was stolen, and you have one of the key plot points for "A Plumm Summer." It's a missing-puppet mystery wrapped around a family drama involving a teen's coming-of-age and a wayward dad's quest for redemption.

A superbly cast Henry Winkler plays Happy Herb, a beloved Montana TV icon and best pal of puppet Froggy Doo. According to production notes, the real Herb McAllister hosted a top-rated kids' show for more than two decades -- with a brief forced hiatus in 1968, when his puppet mysteriously vanished. The abduction even made it onto NBC's "Huntley-Brinkley Report," which noted that federal agents had been sent in to unravel the mystery.

Nothing could render 5-year-old Rocky Plumm (a scene-stealing Owen Pearce) more miserable than the theft of his favorite TV character. With their parents (William Baldwin, Lisa Guerrero) constantly bickering, Rocky's adolescent brother Elliott (Chris J. Kelly) is more concerned with finding his own place in the world than placating the tyke. But when a beautiful girl (Morgan Flynn) with a taste for sleuthing moves in next door, Rocky and the teens set out to solve the crime.

The amateur sleuths draw up a list of suspects that includes a local bully, a bumbling general-store clerk, a pair of suspicious-looking FBI agents (Peter Scolari, Rick Overton) and even Happy Herb's wife Viv (Brenda Strong). Naturally, there are a few red herrings along the way, and a denouement that deliciously blends action, comedy and a touch of sweetness.

That combination is exactly what distinguishes Caroline Zelder's debut feature, and it's likely what attracted this talented group of actors to the script (credited to Zelder, Frank Antonelli, and T.J. Lynch). Zelder has a way of imbuing even the smallest gestures -- like a teenager's slump or a 5-year-old's intractable stare -- with meaning. Thesping is at a very high level across the board.

Tech elements are fine. Lenser Mark Vargo bathes the Montana locations in glorious natural light; Alan Muraoka's production design and Nola Roller's costumes mostly nail the 1968 aesthetic, but could have been even more consistent. Jeff Daniels provides reassuring narration.

Camera (Technicolor), Mark Vargo; editor, Jonathan Lucas; music, Tom Hiel; music supervisor, Antonelli; production designer, Alan E. Muraoka; set decorator, Beau Peterson; costume designer, Nola Roller; sound (Dolby Digital/DTS), Troy Dunn; assistant director, Doug Metzger; casting, Jory Weitz. Reviewed on DVD, Los Angeles, Feb. 11, 2008. (In Santa Barbara Film Festival -- Applebox.)