

Blu-ray Review: Flawed Satire ‘God Bless America’ Has Moments of Brilliance

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CHICAGO – How does one attempt to review a picture that has a 5-star opening act, a 2-star finale and several flashes of brilliance amidst a middling midsection? Are the good parts worth savoring despite the overarching flaws? In the case of Bobcat Goldthwait’s scathing yet softhearted satire on American idiocy, the answer is a resounding yes..

“God Bless America” is not as uproarious as Goldthwait’s 2006 effort, “Sleeping Dogs Lie,” nor as poignant as his 2009 Robin Williams vehicle, “World’s Greatest Dad,” but as a disgruntled liberal’s wet dream, the film is impossible to resist—at least during its first half-hour. What nearly holds the film together is the endearingly droll work from leading man Joel Murray (brother of Bill), who could easily attain cult status for this role.



Blu-ray Rating: **3.5/5.0**

One of the criticisms routinely launched at this film is that it falls far short of its obvious cinematic inspiration, 1976’s “Network.” That may be true, but how many writers have ever been able to equal the operatic eloquence and blistering power of Paddy Chayefsky’s dialogue? In many ways, “America” is much closer in spirit to James Gunn’s raucous 2010 vigilante comedy, “Super,” which centered on a similar relationship between a depressed middle-aged sad sack and a punky young psycho. Murray stars as Frank, a frustrated everyman who has reached the end of his rope. His ex-wife (Melinda Page Hamilton of “Sleeping Dogs Lie”) wants nothing to do with him, his estranged daughter (Mackenzie Brooke Smith) is hopelessly spoiled, his career has been destroyed due to a bogus sexual harassment charge and his doctor has just informed him that he has a brain tumor. With nothing to live for, Frank decides to end it all, but a reprehensible episode of “My Super Sweet Sixteen” causes him to make a change of plans. Instead of offing himself, Frank would rather rid the world of undesirables like 16-year-old Chloe (newcomer Maddie Hasson), a self-absorbed brat so loathsome that she makes Veruca Salt look like a particularly subdued member of the Family Von Trapp. Before the killing spree occurs, Frank entertains violent fantasies that are hilarious in the sickest possible sense. Yet it’s in Frank’s exasperated monologues about regurgitated media soundbites passing for human interaction where Murray, Goldthwait and the film as a whole truly shine.



Joel Murray and Tara Lynne Barr star in GOD BLESS AMERICA, a Magnet Release.

Photo credit: Magnet Releasing

Once Frank falls under the sociopathic charms of a pint-sized murderess, Roxy (played with gleefully unhinged relish by “Disney Channel” vet Tara Lynne Barr), the film slowly, but surely, starts to run out of steam. There’s only so much value, comedic or otherwise, to be found in repetitive scenes of people being gunned down. The film springs back to life whenever the characters open their mouths to deliver startlingly pointed and occasionally provocative attacks on their least favorite aspects of American society. It’s here where audience sympathies start to shift away from the bloodthirsty duo as their contradictions become more apparent. Roxy launches a vicious tirade on the self-conscious dialogue of Diablo Cody, which is ironic considering that her character comes off as a self-loathing Juno with a snarky quip for every occasion.

Even more ironic is the fact that Ellen “Juno” Page played an even crazier (and admittedly funnier) sidekick to Rainn Wilson’s righteous homicidal maniac (who was, curiously enough, also named Frank) in “Super.” Similarly hypocritical is Goldthwait’s outrage directed at Reality TV’s exploitation of weak, William Hung-type eccentrics for the purposes of mean-spirited entertainment, since Goldthwait’s hysterical 2003 TV movie, “Windy City Heat,” did just that (though it remains unclear whether the film’s lead, Perry Caravello, is indeed in on the joke). These intriguing character ambiguities elevate the picture from one-note territory, but they ultimately cause the satire to miss the mark. That being said, there’s still enough great gags and scathing send-ups in this film to make it a worthy rental for any fan of wild and wacky B-movies.



God Bless America was released on Blu-ray and DVD on July 3,

2012.

Photo credit: Magnolia Home Entertainment

“God Bless America” is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English and Spanish subtitles and includes a cheerful commentary track where Murray proves to be the best ad-libber of the bunch, both onscreen and off. Some of his character’s best lines are singled out as improvisations, such as his lewd message for his ex-wife’s new squeeze. Murray comments on the film’s multiple similarities to his brother’s Oscar-winning film, “Lost in Translation,” while suggesting that viewers devise their own drinking game based on the number of times that the American flag is spotted in the frame. Goldthwait reveals the curious “Wizard of Oz” homage that he attempted to construct in the film’s final moments, which certainly explains Roxy’s rather inexplicable pigtails. I had hoped that this disc would feature the complete, uncut footage of the uproariously cringe-inducing programming that plays on Frank’s television, but all the extras offer are 5 minutes of unused bits, such as a hideous kiddie pageant, “Jersey Shorties,” where reluctant tykes are paraded around wearing Snooki wigs and painted abs. There’s also more amusing scenes of the monstrous Chloe, who orders that her party planners arrange for “16 acrobatic panthers” to spell out her name.

Nearly an hour of additional interviews are included in the special features, allowing Goldthwait to further address his motives for making the picture. He deflects any comparisons to Joel Schumacher’s 1993 thriller, “Falling Down,” since that film’s antihero embodied white rage against ethnic gangs, whereas Frank is an angry liberal taking down people for “not being nice.” Goldthwait also claims that his film isn’t all that similar to Oliver Stone’s 1994 blood-soaked satire, “Natural Born Killers,” partly because that film placed the blame fully on the media, and partly because Stone “has the sense of humor of a Vulcan.” He says that the chief enemy in his film is “our own appetite” for the crap force-fed to us by an increasingly vapid media obsessed with hollow celebrity. Though Goldthwait sticks to his guns, so to speak, he says that an (unnamed) online critic may have had a point when he described the film as a diatribe by an old guy who just wants the kids to get off his lawn. Since Goldthwait shares many traits with such kids (as evidenced in “Windy City Heat”), he’s essentially caught himself in his own crosshairs.

‘God Bless America’ is released by Magnolia Home Entertainment and stars Joel Murray, Tara Lynne Barr, Melinda Page Hamilton, Rich McDonald and Mackenzie Brooke Smith. It was written and directed by Bobcat Goldthwait. It was released on July 3, 2012. It is rated R.



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