

Chris Rock, Martin Lawrence Are Stiff in Tepid ‘Death at a Funeral’

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – When some of the funniest comedians in the business – Chris Rock, Martin Lawrence, Tracy Morgan – can’t deliver a absurdist comedy about family secrets, then there truly is “Death at a Funeral.”

When the patriarch of an African American clan dies, his real and extended family gather for the funeral. Chris Rock is the oldest son Aaron, followed by the younger brother, Ryan (Martin Lawrence). Ryan is the prodigal son, admired by his relatives in his occupation as a writer, but preferring not to participate in the day-to-day family circumstance.

The extended family includes Aaron’s cousin Elaine (Zoe Saldana), who is inviting the wrath of her father (Ron Glass), by bringing her fiancé Oscar (James Marsden) to the service. Matters are further complicated by family friend Derek (Luke Wilson), who still professes love for Elaine, and his friend Norman (Tracy Morgan), who says he is “like family” to the clan, a notion that everyone dismisses.



Throw in an wheelchair bound and aging Uncle Russell (Danny Glover), a misplaced bottle of the hallucinogen Mescaline (that everyone

mistakes for Valium) and a mysterious stranger named Frank (Peter Dinklage), and this funeral would be better off as a closed casket ceremony when it comes to revealing secrets.

In the stage play tradition of the “slamming door” type farces, this comedy does have a lot of energy based on uncontrolled circumstances and misunderstood relationships. As one disaster after another makes itself known during the most solemn end-of-life ritual, the lid that Chris Rock’s character has to keep on the day becomes more difficult to manage.

But because of the large ensemble, everyone in the cast seems muzzled by their assigned quirk, and many of the situational laughs require high concept leaps of faith to occur. One of the funnier bits involved the misplaced Mescaline, that James Marsden imbibes thinking it is the calming Valium. He takes his hallucinations and runs with it, having a lot of fun interrupting the mourning with surreal commentary and bizarre actions. It’s unfortunate that the script took several trips too many with the drug mix-up, stretching the joke to the breaking point, because Marsden had the most of scene steals underneath its power.

It is becoming more and more apparent that Chris Rock has difficulty residing in a character. He is straitjacketed by the character of Aaron, keeping a low key in his frustrated-novelist-as-tax-accountant persona, but breaking out also at some point to deliver some Chris Rock-esque type comic observations that doesn’t quite fit with his assignment. There was either some improvisation allowed in Neil LaBute’s direction or some script padding on set. Neither scenario makes the film better.

The supporting cast never breaks out as well. They are given certain actions to accomplish, but they don’t give the appearance of being connected to each other in their randomness. Tracy Morgan gets busy playing the flustered Norman, the center of the universe in this film for all the sequences, yet it might of been more fun to reveal why he is thinks he’s connected to a family that wants no part of him, rather than a constant riffing in the Tracy-Morgan-30-Rock mode.



Keeping Cool: Zoe Saldana as Elaine in 'Death at a Funeral'
Photo Credit: Phil Bray for © 2010 Screen Gems, Inc.

Martin Lawrence can’t shake his “Martin Lawrence” personality. Luke Wilson plays his usual unflappable below-the-radar commercial pitchman. Danny Glover is full-on in cantankerous old man land. So there either was a reliance on expected actor images or cheaper humor derived from a man sitting on a toilet and Peter Dinklage’s lack of height. There was nothing sharp about Death at a Funeral, despite its roster of heavyweight comic talent and potential for the bluntness within the reputation of director Neil LaBute.

It is the Prince from the movie “Enchanted,” James Marsden, who reigns triumphant as the film’s prime jester. That about says it all for this funeral.

“Death at a Funeral” opens everywhere April 16th. Featuring Chris Rock, Martin Lawrence, Tracy Morgan, Luke Wilson, Danny Glover, James Marsden, Zoe Salanda and Peter Dinklage, directed by Neil LaBute. Rated “R”



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