

Whale of a Tale For Drew Barrymore in ‘Big Miracle’

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- [1980s](#) [2]
- [Alaska](#) [3]
- [Big Miracle](#) [4]
- [Dermot Mulroney](#) [5]
- [Drew Barrymore](#) [6]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [7]
- [John Krasinski](#) [8]
- [Kristen Bell](#) [9]
- [Movie Review](#) [10]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [11]
- [Rob Riggle](#) [12]
- [Ted Danson](#) [13]
- [Tim Blake Nelson](#) [14]
- [Universal Pictures](#) [15]
- [Whales](#) [16]



Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Whale of a tale (chuckle), no other headline writer has thought of that. “Big Miracle” is a family movie with Drew Barrymore, John Krasinski, Kristen Bell, Ted Danson and the voice of Ronald Reagan, that will not have adults seeking the emergency exits. It’s about whales.

What is enjoyable about the film is its combination of inspiration and sincerity, without sticky sappiness. Set in the late 1980s, there are references to the era without overstating it, and a lot of aside commentary about the media, traditional Alaskan tribal values and balanced environmentalism. This is based on a true story, but unlike last year’s “Dolphin Tale,” it doesn’t rely on having to rework what happened to make sure all the characters look heroic. “Big Miracle” has a nice balance, which gives it a good karma.

Adam Carlson (John Krasinski) is an ambitious TV reporter in 1987, doing time in Barrows Point, Alaska, on assignment for “local angle” features. While filming an innocuous story, he happens upon a whale spray from a hole in the thick northern ice. It seems that three grey whales, two adults and a cub, are stuck in the frozen tundra and to breathe they need to take turns emerging from the solitary hole. The report that Adam files is picked up on the “Today Show.”



John Krasinski (Adam) and Drew Barrymore (Rachel) in ‘Big Miracle’
Photo credit: Universal Pictures

Once the story is on the wire, reporters and the media – including perky Los Angeles reporter Jill Jerard (Kristen Bell) – descend on Barrows Point to adopt the whales for their ratings. Following close behind is Rachel (Drew Barrymore) from Greenpeace, to monitor the rescue operation. An ice breaker ship is needed, and Texas oilman J.W. McGraw (Ted Danson) becomes an unlikely ally, volunteering his vessel. The story to free the whales reaches up to the highest level of government, as even Saint Ronald of Reagan and his chief of staff offer their Republican values to the effort.

The movie has a bit of fun, and is unafraid to mock some of the conventions of the rescue effort, as well as lionize it. Rob Riggle and James LeGros are comic relief, playing Minnesotans who have a surefire ice melting machine, and the re-emerging Dermot Mulroney is a military man who isn't afraid to make a little hey-hey. The media of the time are also gently ridiculed as precursors to the shills of the modern era, with John Michael Higgins doing a nice turn as a preening L.A. newsman named Wes Handrick.

Drew Barrymore is cast well, her edgy voice adds the right amount of annoyance to a pushy activist. And although it will take John Krasinski a long while to shake his Jim-from-"The-Office" character, his pleasant blandness is perfect for an ambitious TV reporter. He anchors the story somewhat, as it is determined that he and the Barrymore character once dated, so he acts as the conscious between the media and the environmentalist.

The other "side," represented by the oil magnate played by Ted Danson, is given a nice balance in their efforts to get the ice cutters to the whales. And Danson does a terrific job with the subtle shift between operating a great P.R. stunt to genuinely caring for the whales. The government is treated as American nostalgia with a dash of "Dr. Strangelove," as the earnest Reagan chief of staff and the jelly bean eating commander-in-chief provide laughs and illusions.



Ted Danson (J.W. McGraw) is Happy to be in 'Big Miracle'
Photo credit: Universal Pictures

The pacing of the film is a tad slow, as the gears shift slowly in the efforts to free the whales. The native Alaskans are also in the background, with an old-versus-new subplot, as represented by a grandpa and grandson struggling to understand each other. This is a bit forced, but does pay off in the end. In conclusion, this is the rare all-for-the-family movie that everyone can enjoy, even the theoretical grandpa and grandson.

Hey, and what about those whales? Dubbed Fred, Wilma and Bamm-Bamm, even they cannot escape the anthropomorphism in the hands of a media and the rescuers – they desperately want America to have that feel good story. Spoiler alert – you'll be nicely entertained and inspired by this...wait for it...whale of a tale.

"Big Miracle" opens everywhere on February 3rd. Featuring Drew Barrymore, John Krasinski, Kristen Bell, Ted Danson, Tim Blake Nelson, Dermot Mulroney and Rob Riggle. Screenplay by Jack Amiel and Michael Begler, directed by Ken Kwapis. Rated "PG"



[17]

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- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/alaska>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/big-miracle>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/dermot-mulroney>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/drew-barrymore>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/hollywoodchicagocom-content>
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