

Frank Langella Shines in Delightful Sci-Fi Comedy 'Robot and Frank'

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Frank’s world is fading before his eyes. With his wife gone and his children all grown up, Frank lives a reclusive existence, though he doesn’t seem to be in particular need of company. His memory may be fading, but his instincts as a retired cat burglar are still ever-present. He can’t helping stuffing a few soap figurines into his pockets while casually browsing through a store.

This is a plum role for Frank Langella, the wonderfully understated actor capable of projecting a sly intelligence even in his most delusional state. There are echoes here of Leonard Schiller, the aging novelist Langella played in 2007’s woefully overlooked treasure, “Starting Out in the Evening,” in which he found enriching companionship in the unlikelyst of forms. Yet in Jake Schreier’s Sundance prizewinner, “Robot & Frank,” Langella is paired with a far more unusual screen partner.

Rather than place him in a nursing home, his dedicated yet oft-exasperated son, Hunter (James Marsden), forces him to accept the gift of an unnamed robot (voiced by Peter Sarsgaard) that will function as a butler of sorts. Yet Frank soon realizes that the robot is in fact a “health care” aid designed to improve his cognitive functions, and it isn’t long before the mechanical vexation starts waking him up early to plant a garden. Sarsgaard’s voice is utterly unrecognizable, and emulates the deadpan timing of Douglas Rain’s iconic HAL 9000 while draining it of its malevolent edge. “Robot,” as it’s referred to in the film, doesn’t appear to have plans for world domination, primarily because they weren’t programmed into it. When it’s invited to engage in small talk with a fellow robot, all they can think to say to one another is, “I’m functioning normally.” Even Robot’s pleas for Frank to cooperate with it, for fear of being junked, are simply activated to manipulate the man’s emotions, since the machine has none. Robot isn’t a friend so much as it is a catalyst for Frank to reconnect with the universe, for better and worse. His begrudging affection for the artificial creature grows all the more once he realizes that it has no knowledge of what’s considered lawful behavior (a major glitch that’s more than a little far-fetched). Thus, Frank proposes to Robot a new way of improving his cognitive functions: pull off a heist.



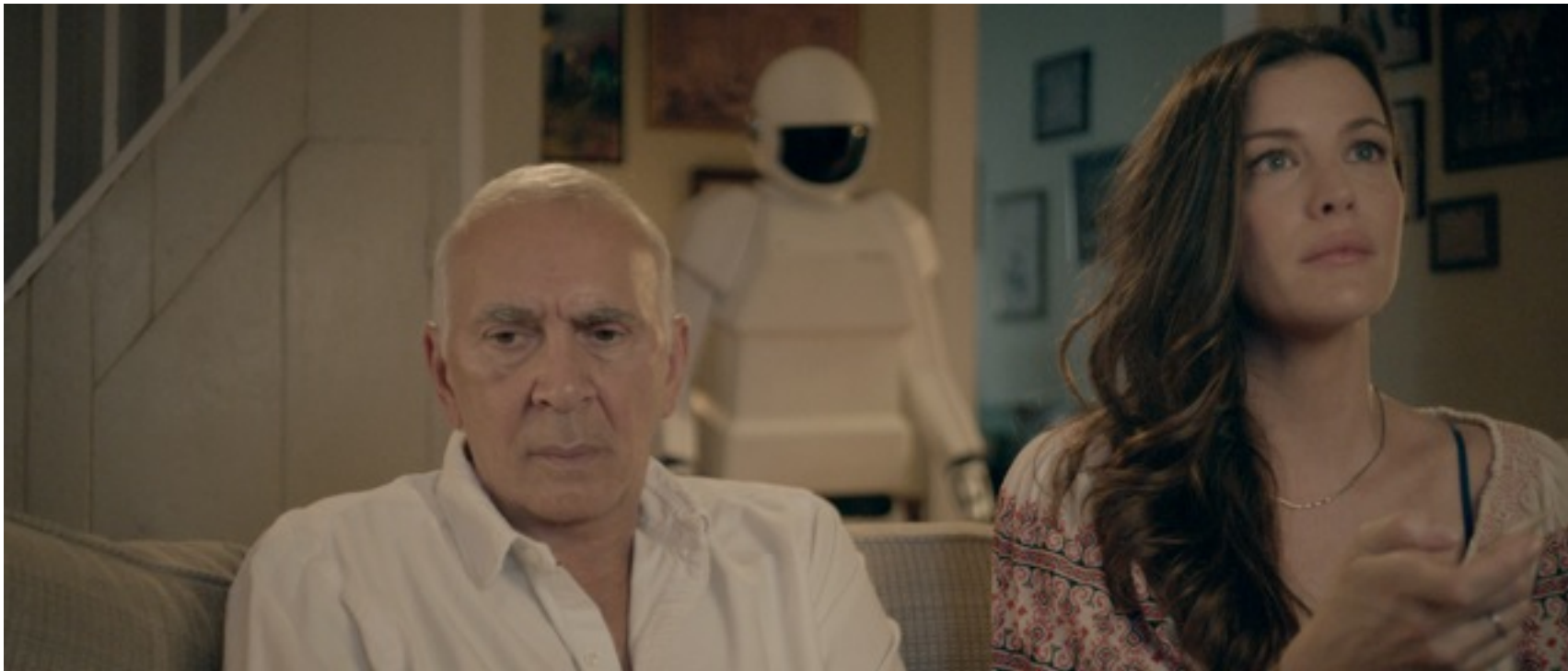
Frank Langella stars in Jake Schreier's Robot and Frank.

Photo credit: Samuel Goldwyn Films and Stage 6 Films

Though this premise may sound like a high concept buddy comedy, its execution is delightfully low-key. In his feature debut, Schreier deftly walks the tightrope between tragedy and farce, while never inching too far in either direction. The band Francis and the Lights (for which the director previously served as keyboardist) brings a subtly brooding tone to various scenes as Frank takes increasingly dire risks with his elaborate schemes. Langella refuses to soften his character’s curmudgeonly shell for the sake of lovability, and when he randomly lashes out at his children, he can seem genuinely brutal. Yet through his partnership with the robot, Frank’s humanity starts to emerge, as well as all of

the regrets that he had kept repressed. Marsden is also very touching as the son harboring resentments yet trying with all of his might to keep his old man from falling apart. The final moments of the film can be read more than one way and are bound to generate discussion afterward.

One of the great pleasures of “Robot & Frank” is the inventive way in which it envisions the “near future” in Cold Spring, N.Y. Frank’s Skype-like home phone system hardly appears to be a stretch from where phone technology is actually heading. Alarming skinny cars zip through traffic, leaving more recognizable models in the dust. And in a twist Ray Bradbury would’ve loved, the local library is now being transformed into a community center, since books have finally been rendered extinct by eReaders. This juicy subplot could’ve been developed even further, though it does provide the agelessly lovely Susan Sarandon with ample screen time as a librarian who seems perfectly comfortable with sharing the company of the awkward yet well-meaning Frank. Liv Tyler also turns up as Frank’s daughter, who’s horrified to discover that Hunter has abandoned her father with an “enslaved” machine. The small yet crucial ways in which her character’s perceptions are altered during the film’s midsection are sublimely portrayed.



Frank Langella and Liv Tyler star in Jake Schreier’s Robot and Frank.

Photo credit: Samuel Goldwyn Films and Stage 6 Films

“Robot & Frank” isn’t interested in saying anything particularly profound. It’s a relatively simple tale, yet it unfolds in ways that are pleasingly unpredictable. What’s most touching is how much Frank (and the audience) grows to care about Robot, even if its own feelings are programmed rather than organic. Langella is bound to reap much of the critical praise, as he should, though Sarsgaard’s fine vocal work should not be overlooked. With his soothing tones and subtle nuances, the actor somehow manages to create a well-rounded character even within the limited constraints of Robot’s anti-personality. In the annals of cinema’s greatest robot voice-overs, Sarsgaard deserves to be ranked near the top. It’s a feat akin to magic.

‘Robot and Frank’ stars Frank Langella, Peter Sarsgaard, Susan Sarandon, James Marsden, Liv Tyler and Jeremy Strong. It was written by Christopher D. Ford and directed by Jake Schreier. It opened August 24th at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema and the Landmark Renaissance Place. It is rated PG-13.



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