

‘The Guilt Trip’ Never Reaches a Destination

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – There has to be something wrong with a movie that by the end, the thought is ‘how did they get a parking spot in San Francisco?’ and ‘how much does that house cost?’ “The Guilt Trip,” with Seth Rogen and Barbra Streisand, is a dispirited exercise in wasted potential.

The story has a savory angle – son wants a reunion for his widowed mother with a long lost love, so he takes her on a business road trip – but the script takes the duo to high concept locations (strip club, Las Vegas) and seen-it-before emotional confrontations with no motivations. There are some interesting moments, but these are quickly squashed by Seth Rogen-esque schtick (annoying) and overacting by Barbra Streisand. If a commitment had been made to really explore the emotional dynamics between a mother and son, or if it were a grittier independent style film with the same premise, it could have been a contender. Instead, it’s 95 minutes of “movie star characters” and their quirks.

Andrew Brewster (Seth Rogen) is an organic chemist who has just invented a new natural cleaning product. Sinking his life savings into the concept, he is to make a pitch to several retail and sales outlets. To do this and save money, he decides to start on the East Coast (he lives in Los Angeles) and drive cross country to the various companies. This gives him an opportunity to go to New Jersey and visit his widowed mother Joyce (Barbra Streisand), before embarking on the journey.



On the Road: Son Andrew (Seth Rogen) and Mother Joyce (Barbra Streisand) in ‘The Guilt Trip’
Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

In a rare intimate moment, Joyce tells her son that she had a brief but intense affair as a younger woman, before she married Andrew's father, and even named Andrew after the former lover. This piques the son's curiosity, and he finds out through the internet that the ex-lover lives in San Francisco, and is unmarried. Under the ruse of the business trip, Andrew asks his mother Joyce to accompany him on the cross country drive, with the last stop now in San Francisco.

The film is entitled "The Guilt Trip," but the relationship between the Rogen and Streisand characters is more like "The Exasperating Trip." There are hints of potential within the story – the ex-lover, the loneliness of Joyce, the failure of Andrew to successfully pitch his product – but these are all solved through predictable high jinks or strange locations. For example, the road trip itself features a book on tape that features some narration that is uncomfortable for a mother and son, and instead of creating tension or even more comedy, it unsurprisingly ends up that both of them loves the book. This is pretty much how all the conflict is handled and how the whole story goes.

Streisand is odd, as she seems to be in real life now. She does remarkably play about ten years younger, and she was willing to give up her usual put-together glamour to create a frumpier Joyce, but she is also strangely more heroic and hyperbolic than she needs to be. Her character is established to be isolated and lonely, but on the road trip she's willing to go inside a strip club, get into an eating contest and gamble all night in Las Vegas, because the premise and screenplay – by Dan Fogelman – couldn't generate a more honest mother/son journey.

Seth Rogen's shelf life as an actor is fast expiring, given his attempt to squelch his usual wise guy persona under a mousey scientist character. He can't help himself, as he sneaks in the Rogen snideness, even though the science personality he has tried to establish wouldn't talk like Seth Rogen. There is one good moment, where his mother finds out about an embarrassing marriage proposal he once made, but that vulnerability is quickly forgotten on the way to her eating contest.



Evergreen: Barbra Streisand in a Scene From 'The Guilt Trip'
Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

Is there any relationship that has more potential for drama or even comedy than a mother and son? That is the most frustrating part of the film, there could have been so much more about regrets, secrets and fear, but because this is a "movie star" vehicle, problems are solved miraculously, lessons are learned succinctly and the once tentative Freudian implications are all worked out.

It all becomes about image and marketing instead of narrative risk. Throw in Seth Rogen, throw in Barbra Streisand (in a comic "comeback") and shoehorn it as a holiday picture for traditional Christmas Day filmgoing. Blend it all together and it results in yet another bland taste.

"The Guilt Trip" opens everywhere on December 19th. Featuring Seth Rogen, Barbra Streisand, Kathy Najimy, Rose Abdoo, Brett Cullen and Colin Hanks. Screenplay by Dan Fogelman. Directed by Anne Fletcher. Rated "PG-13"



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