

No Scrooge in Billy Crystal with ‘Parental Guidance’

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – As the bells toll this Christmas morn, the critical knots are untied and the new comedy, “Parental Guidance,” is deemed to be not bad – even though the marketing might have indicated otherwise. Billy Crystal and Bette Midler make merry and bright as two grandparents taking care of modern kids.

The are three key elements that make the film work – the energy of Crystal and Midler (they never flag), the supporting roles – especially of Marisa Tomei – and it’s a family oriented picture for the holidays that isn’t gag worthy. There is nothing notable about the story, although Crystal is cast as a baseball announcer, which most likely made his New York Yankee-loving soul rise once again from the show business grave. Like a marathon runner who knows his best days are behind him, Crystal does know how to pace this comedy, and save it from the usual pile of coal filmgoers receive with anything rated below “PG-13.”

Artie Decker (Billy Crystal) is a minor league baseball announcer, established in a small California community. As an old school pro, he has become used up as the owners decide to go into a different (younger) direction, and fire him. This distresses the baseball-loving Artie, but his loving wife Diane (Bette Midler) is right by his side as they ponder the next phase of their lives.



Family Plot: Artie (Billy Crystal) and Diane (Bette Midler) in ‘Parental Guidance’
Photo credit: 20th Century Fox Pictures

Cue the phone call – it is Artie and Diane's daughter Alice (Marisa Tomei), who needs her parents to come and look after their grandchildren (Bailee Madison, Joshua Rush, Kyle Breitkopf) while she and her husband Phil (Tom Everett Scott) are out of town. With Artie no longer working, it is the perfect opportunity to do this task, even though the distance has not exactly endeared the “other” grandparents – as Diane puts it – to Alice's family. To make matters worse, the Phil has designed an electronic “smart” house in which Artie will have to interact.

This is a same old plot of old versus new, modern technology versus instinct, and that part it has no bite. What makes it more tolerable are the personalities of Crystal and Midler, familiar as an old shoe and followed through without any drastic variations. Particularly impressive is how Midler held up her part of it, which essentially was a supporting and facilitating role. Her backstory is she was a TV “weather bunny” and for her distinct personality, it's believable.

Crystal – the old comic pro – can still can throw a line or two, and his rehearsal of his fantasy movie job as a baseball announcer probably annoyed his household for weeks. The addition of baseball is well done in the film, especially when the oldster Artie encounters the politically correct game – let's just say that “outs” are too harsh for the sensitive kid sportsmen. Despite an inevitably groin clobbering at the end of the sequence, the point of helicoptering parents is well made.

Oscar winner Marisa Tomei adds a bit more grit to the old daughter/mother-unsure-of-her role character, she's practically sweating bullets to keep up with her soapy scenarios. She does a singing bit with Midler that defines discomfort – it's hard to imagine the performance tips the Divine Ms. M. was throwing at the hapless Tomei, who only four years ago portrayed a stripper. Marisa picks up the paycheck, and hopes we don't tell the PTA. Tom Everett Scott has aged gracefully since “That Thing You Do!” (1996), from drummer to Daddy.



Billy Crystal Wrestles with Barker (Kyle Breitkopf) while Alice (Marisa Tomei) Looks on in 'Parental Guidance'
Photo credit: 20th Century Fox Pictures

There are some flat spots in the film – okay several – but forgiveness is in the holiday nature and there aren't many of these types of film where you can literally bring the whole family – grandma, step-grandma, second grandma removed and hip grandma. It is just a basic clash of the generations movie, with Billy Crystal doing his post-modern borscht belting. By the time the stuttering son is cured by reciting a famous baseball announcer's call, there is not a dry seat in the house.

So deck those halls, sleigh those demons and sneak in a nice rum punch into the theater if that's what it takes..."Parental Guidance" is 104 minutes in which no one has to be the wiser when you sneak into "Django Unchained." Is there any better redemption on Christmas Day?

"Parental Guidance" opens everywhere on December 25th. Featuring Billy Crystal, Bette Midler, Marisa Tomei, Tom Everett Scott, Bailee Madison, Joshua Rush and Kyle Breitkopf. Screenplay by Lisa Addario and Joe Syracuse. Directed by Andy Fickman. Rated "PG"



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