

Hard to Wrap Head Around Misguided 'Mental'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on March 27, 2013 - 1:33pm

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Despite boasting the talented efforts of the always-great and tragically underrated Toni Collette, P.J. Hogan's "Mental," opening this weekend in Chicago, is a tonal mess. It's a bewilderingly strange movie, the kind of thing that one might write off as being lost in translation from its Australian origin before realizing it wasn't that funny there either.

Shirley Moochmoore has gone crazy. She runs through her backyard, singing songs from "The Sound of Music," as her five daughters panic at the awareness that poor mom has seen the far side of the deep end. It gets worse when Shirley becomes convinced that her always-absent husband (Anthony LaPaglia) has won on "Wheel of Fortune" and so starts ordering merchandise online that the family can't afford. Shirley is sent "on holiday" and her husband has no idea what to do with the five girls. Oh, did I mention all five think they're going crazy as well? And at least one might be right?

Enter "Mental"'s version of Maria from "Sound of Music," a surly nomad with a dog named Shaz (Toni Collette). She is "beyond humiliation." And she is picked up on the corner and basically put in charge of raising the Moochmore girls and teaching them that everyone is a bit left of normal. We're all mental. It just comes down to how one deals with it.



Mental

Photo credit: Arclight Films

I adore Toni Collette. She's simply great in everything she does. "The Sixth Sense," "The United States of Tara," "In Her Shoes," "About a Boy," "Little Miss Sunshine" — she always rules. And she ruled back in her first collaboration with Hogan, the very-funny "Muriel's Wedding." Where the two found a way to humanize the off-center in that comedy, a lot of "Mental" feels like it's laughing at its suburbanite subjects as much as embracing them. It's tonally off. Jokes hit the floor. Scenes go on too long or ideas are cut off too quickly. It's as if Hogan has made a film as mental as its subject matter, which was an ambitious route to take if it was intentional but an ill-advised one. And when the film gets manipulative and sentimental in the second half, it's even less effective than the comedy.

"Mental" is far from a complete failure (although the drama of the final act comes damn close). Collette's performance and commitment to this out-there character is admirable and there are a few funny scenes (particularly ones with the uptight Moochmore neighbor and her leggy

daughter). I was never bored. More often I was just bewildered at why “Mental” wasn’t coming together. It’s “girl power as refusal to constrict to the norm” theme can be fun and Collette embraces it with both arms. I just wish there was more for her to put them around.

“Mental” stars Toni Collette, Rebecca Gibney, Anthony LaPaglia, and Liev Schreiber. It was written and directed by P.J. Hogan. It opens in Chicago on March 29, 2013.



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