

Same Weary Tyler Perry Format in ‘Peeples’

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Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The Tyler Perry “filmmaking machine” cranks out lowbrow comedies or high drama potboilers without any regard for originality. While this may jibe with Perry’s creative vision, the films themselves are a waste of time. Tina Gordon Chism directs the latest Perry production, “Peeples.”

“Peeples” has nothing new to say about familial relationships – even though it’s about family – and plenty to say about redundant gags, inexplicable character motivations and overblown reactions to the simplest of tasks. One idea of what is suppose to generate laughs is to put grown adults on bicycles that are straight out of a urban hipster’s garage, and have them race each other. Although the cast is pure gold – Craig Robinson, Kerry Washington, David Alan Grier, S. Epatha Merkerson, Melvin Van Peebles and Diahann Carroll – they have to try their damndest to spin that gold from a script made of lead. The return of these films might win on a show “business” platform, but the law of karma and diminishing creative returns demands that Tyler Perry will one day have to atone for these extended misuses of celluloid.

Wade Walker (Craig Robinson) is an affable musician who caters to children with songs that make them learn something – which allows for a song about going to the bathroom – and is about to pop the question to his longtime lover Grace Peeples (Kerry Washington). However, his fair lady is distracted by an upcoming family reunion, at an estate in an wealthy New England fishing village. Walker has never “met the parents” or her extended family, who he has dubbed, the “Chocolate Kennedys.”



Grace (Kerry Washington), Wade (Craig Robinson, center) and Virgil (David Alan Grier) in ‘Peeples’
Photo credit: Lionsgate

After Grace convinces Wade he doesn’t need to come to the weekend proceedings (a celebration of the novel “Moby Dick”), he is convinced by his brother Chris (Malcolm Barrett) to crash the weekend, which he strangely does. Instead of being uncomfortably told to leave, he is uncomfortably greeted by family patriarch Virgil (David Alan Grier), mother Daphne (S. Epatha Merkerson), and later, Grandpa and Nana (Melvin Van Peebles and Diahann Carroll). As the family secrets are unraveled, this is about to become one nutty weekend.

This film runs its engine on the “Idiot Plot,” which defines that all the characters, instead of acting like normal human beings given the situations, act like idiots to drive the narrative. There is nothing inherently wrong with the Peeples (in fact they’ve got a nice piece of pricey real estate), even though the idiot plot wants us to think so. We are teased with the juicy element that the family might be crazy or off-kilter in some way, because Kerry Washington’s character is so insistent that Wade not meet them. What if they are African Americans who have been kidnapped by aliens and forced to live as white people in New England? Alas, that is not the story. We have to believe they’ve chosen to be like that.

The script from director Tina Gordon Chism is supposedly based on an incident she herself when through, but in the course of her narrative – and Tyler Perry’s fingerprints are all over it – she includes conventions like the humping dog, the male viewpoint of a lesbian couple, inexplicably bizarre fraternity rituals from a man out of college for 40 years, the great Melvin Van Peebles participating in said rituals and upper middle class pornography (the voyeurism of nice real estate and material overindulgence). There is nothing original or intriguing about the Peeples.

The cast sweats it out, and even though Craig Robinson is miscast as a romantic leading man, he does find a way to get some juice out of the role. Kerry Washington is a fantastic actor and has screen presence, yet capitulates to the “girlfriend” role. David Alan Grier, Diahann Carroll and the aforementioned Van Peebles reduce their legendary names to the level of sitcom humor, which a Tyler Perry produced film piles on like manure on a field – yet nothing grows from it.



Wade Thinks Something is Fishy in 'Peeples'
Photo credit: Lionsgate

What is also questionable is the family’s background. Although Wade establishes them as the “Chocolate Kennedys,” the concept is left with that line alone. How does an African American family get to white bread New England, and become involved in the Moby Dick Festival? Everybody treats it as normal, which in the Tyler universe I guess is suppose to be funny, but it ends up being the mystery that is never solved. This may be more significant an achievement than President Obama’s election.

The suspicion is that anybody buying a ticket this weekend for “Peeples,” will get exactly what they expect, given that it is blessed by Tyler P. But among all that cash box ringing, wouldn’t it be nice if one of the films went beyond expectations?

“Peeples” opens everywhere in Chicago on May 10th. Featuring Craig Robinson, Kerry Washington, David Alan Grier, S. Epatha Merkerson. Melvin Van Peebles and Diahann Carroll. Written and directed by Tina Gordon Chism. Rated “PG-13”



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [11]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [10]

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