

‘Napoleon Dynamite’ Creator Jared Hess Scores With ‘Gentlemen Broncos’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on November 13, 2009 - 9:29am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Writer/Director Jared Hess’ universe, where obscure pop culture references and strange survivors abide, gets another workout with the spontaneously funny “Gentlemen Broncos,” which also features Mike White and Jennifer Coolidge.

Gentlemen Broncos features the affable Michael Angarano as Benjamin, a science fiction nerd with a penchant for creating his own intergalactic stories. His widowed mother, Judith (Jennifer Coolidge) is his biggest cheerleader, but is racked with bi-polar bouts of crying in conjunction with a fledgling designer nightgown business. When she sends Benjamin away to a sci-fi writing camp, it puts into motion the next phase of their lives.



Hess’ Material World: Michael Angarano as Benjamin and Jennifer Coolidge as Judith in ‘Gentleman Broncos’
Photo credit: Seth Smoot for Fox Searchlight

At the camp Benjamin meets Tabatha (Halley Feiffer), a perplexing fellow nerdling who vaguely takes a shine to him. She reads his stories of

Bronco, a sci-fi action hero who is searching for his lost testicle. Bronco is a lusty adventurer, who rides bucks (male deer) that can shoot laser beams. His writings also come to the attention of his author hero, Rob Decker (Jemaine Clement), who recognizes his talent by stealing his story for publication.

Back at home, Benjamin must contend with his new found friendship with Tabatha, selling the movie rights for his story to a untalented director named Lonnie (Héctor Jiménez), and his new best friend/guardian angel, Dusty (Mike White).

At the core of all of Jared Hess’ films (“Napoleon Dynamite,” “Nacho Libre”) are anti-heroes who use the power of love to complete their quests. Gentlemen Broncos is no exception. Benjamin has dedicated all of his stories to his father, the late park ranger named Bronco, and has formulated a whole deep space world around his heroics.

This is at times hilarious stuff, as off kilter and endearing as Napoleon D. The on-screen rendering of the Bronco story is especially heady, considering we get the tale from three points of view - Benjamin’s original (with Sam Rockwell as Bronco), Rob Decker’s rather queer recopying (Rockwell again) and Lonnie’s film version, which features an overmatched but eager-to-please Dusty as Bronco.



Buckin' Bronco: Sam Rockwell in 'Gentlemen Broncos'
Photo credit: Seth Smoot for Fox Searchlight

There are softer spots in the comedy than Dynamite, but it is much more accessible than Nacho Libre. As in the previous films, Broncos uses a style of counteraction against its enemies – think Napoleon’s dance and Jack Black’s wrestling – but here it includes the shooting rays from the flying bucks and a recurring blow gun that Benjamin uses towards the end to roll-on-the-floor-laughter effectiveness.

The cast, as usual in the HessWorld, plays it as straight as possible, with the exception of Jiménez’s Lonnie, who might possibly be brain damaged. Haley Feiffer handles her character beautifully, keeping Benjamin and the audience guessing as to what her motives essentially are. Jemaine Clement as the larcenous author is so complete with his bizarre villainy that even in comeuppance there was an endearing quality about him.

Like Napoleon and Nacho before him, Benjamin seeks that holy grail of enduring recognition so he can rescue himself and the world around him. The laughs from such a journey are a natural extension, in this case, of science fiction, the writer, the plagiarist, the girl and a hero named Bronco, who might possibly save the whole universe.

Jared Hess (with his co-writer/wife Jerusha) just want you to live in this universe for awhile, recognize some of yourself in their characters and have a bit of fun. It is what their films are all about. As Napoleon Dynamite would say, "Just follow your heart. That’s what I do."

"Gentlemen Broncos" opens in Chicago November 13, 2009, with a limited release elsewhere. Check local listings for theaters and times. Featuring Michael Angarano, Jennifer Coolidge, Halley Feiffer, Héctor Jiménez, Mike White and Sam Rockwell, directed by Jared Hess. Rated "PG-13."



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Source URL (retrieved on *Apr 19 2024 - 7:38pm*):

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