

More action than comic cleverness for 'Get Smart' spoof

Contributed by Tim Riley
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GET SMART (Rated PG-13)

Updating a spy spoof TV series from the Cold War-era poses a certain amount of risk. Don Adams's brainless agent Maxwell Smart in the delightfully amusing "Get Smart" is a hard act to follow.

As originally conceived, the character of Max was an Inspector Clouseau-like agent who would bungle his way to success during the course of a half-hour show. His charm was clueless behavior, punctuated with catch phrases and dim observations. The challenge for the updated screen version of "Get Smart" is to find the right man to fill the shoe containing a phone.

For the contemporary setting, Steve Carell, the actor who made his mark in the titular role of "The 40-Year-Old Virgin," is absolutely the right choice for this task. Smartly, Carell does not try to impersonate Don Adams, instead taking the lack of self-awareness in a whole new direction.

For the uninitiated, the original "Get Smart" focused on the battles between mysterious agencies, the U.S. spy agency CONTROL and the evil crime syndicate known as KAOS. The key players at CONTROL that Max worked with included the Chief and Agent 99 (then the endearing Barbara Feldon).

In today's world of "Get Smart," some things are a little different. At the beginning, Max is an eager policy wonk who writes vital 600-page reports ignored by everybody. Yet he is frustrated with his desk job and anxious to become a field agent.

The Chief (Alan Arkin) wants to keep Max at the headquarters, while charismatic superstar Agent 23 (Dwayne Johnson) gets all the fun of globe-trotting field work. When KAOS manages to compromise most of the field agents, Max gets his big chance to step outside his office job.

For his maiden assignment, Max is paired up with Agent 99, a lovely but lethal veteran who is not keen to be saddled with an office dweeb. In the TV series, Agent 99 was almost fawning over Max, but that's hardly the case here, though eventually you know that a certain amount of warmth and affection will inevitably develop between these characters. The contemporary Agent 99 uses more than feminine wiles to get her way; she's a proficient martial arts expert who's also handy with all types of weapons.

The plot resembles that of so many James Bond films, where the evil crime syndicate SPECTRE had the same goal of world domination as KAOS. Here, the bad guys get their hands on nuclear weapons and threaten to blow up places if their ransom demands are unmet.

The key KAOS operative is Siegfried (Terence Stamp), assisted by his bumbling sidekick, Shtarker (Ken Davitian). Siegfried's network of terror extends to a munitions factory in Russia that is disguised as a bakery. Agent 99 and Max chase after bad guys around the Russian countryside, even infiltrating an elegant party at a mansion, where Agent 99 and Max have an amusing dance competition.

When the CONTROL agents end up in Moscow at the bakery, the action takes a radical shift into the type of explosive violence that one would expect from a James Bond movie. And this is just the beginning of the film's increasing penchant for the kind of high-octane action that only comes with a blockbuster.

Keeping up with KAOS's evil plan to detonate a nuclear bomb in Los Angeles while the president (James Caan) is attending a concert at Disney Hall requires a full-blown chase sequence that ordinarily has little to do with a comedy.

I would surmise that "Get Smart" employs both comedy and explosive action as a marketing hook to reel in the young audience that likely has no familiarity with the original TV series. This strategy is understandable, and the box office receipts will tell if this was the smart move.

Even though Mel Brooks and Buck Henry, the original creators of the TV characters, are the "consultants" on this picture, "Get Smart" won't succeed on its past glories.

"Get Smart" had promise to be a very satisfying spy spoof, and it does offer a decent measure of enjoyable fun, though I was hoping for more than it delivered. And yet, fortunately enough, Steve Carell's comedic talent and his innate ability to tap into a clueless persona serve him well in playing an inept spy.

DVD RELEASE UPDATE

Adam Carolla may not be a household name, but some may remember him for teaming up with Jimmy Kimmel on "The Man Show." That alone should give you an indication of Adam's comic sensibilities.

He stars in "The Hammer" as a middle-aged carpenter and boxing instructor who yearns for his shot at Olympic glory. Losing his job and his girlfriend on his 40th birthday, Adam shakes his complacency when he is invited to try out for the U.S. Olympic Boxing team.

"The Hammer" didn't play wide in the theaters, but it is worth a look on DVD as an off-beat comedy with plenty of laughs.

For the adult crowd, Showtime's debauched series "Californication" has its first season available on DVD.

David Duchovny, far removed from his "X-Files" fame, plays a downbeat, self-loathing writer whose life spins out of control as he juggles his sex and drug addictions while raising a daughter and trying to win back his ex-girlfriend.

Duchovny brings new meaning to the swinging bachelor lifestyle. "Californication" is full of edgy dialogue and controversial sex situations.

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