

Child's Play
A Buddy Review
By: Adam Dombrow

Growing up, I was a huge fan of shows like *Zoobilee Zoo*, *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*; I especially liked when they would use puppets! My sister was a **massive** fan of *Barney and Friends*, to such an extent that I *still to this day* remember the words to the closing "I Love You" song. But let's be honest: there *was* always something a *little bit* off about those shows - something sinister lingering just below the surface. *Buddy* takes that underlying mischief, and unleashes it to manipulate the audience into a child-like fever dream!

Casper Kelly throws his hat into the 2026 full-length horror director/writer debut soup, and I have to say that his offering was (in my opinion) the most fun of them so far! Kelly displays a deep understanding of creating anthropomorphic miscreants with hidden, sinister motivations—something that he no doubt mastered while writing for Cartoon Network, as well as helming 1999's *The Scooby Doo Project*. *Buddy* lavishes in the space between analog horror and something coming out of the Jim Henson Company.

Cinematographer Zach Kuperstein is set free upon what, for the most part, amounts to an exaggerated, low-budget, PBS kids' show, and his tricks are on full display; think of something along the lines of Michel Gondry's *Be Kind Rewind*, where—in a sort of tongue-in-cheek sense—you can *see* how the magic is made. I couldn't help but laugh at some of the more obvious nods to other films, such as *Poltergeist*, or *Videodrome*, although, sadly, the slapstick nature of *Buddy* only scratches the surface of the horrors of those films. I especially loved the style of the *It's Buddy* segments, and how they play with the screen ratios, etc.

You can tell that the cast of *Buddy* was having a great time hamming it up on the set. *Buddy's* narrative is carried by (the always impressive) Cristin Milioti, and newcomer Delaney Quinn. Milioti sadly doesn't get to show off too much of her wonderful comedic chops here, which is a shame; for her part she plays character Grace with a reserved sense of sadness. It's a performance where less is honestly more: there are undertones of a life steeped in confusion, and pain, and Milioti makes it known that her character *knows* something is amiss, but she just can't put her finger on it. 11 year old Quinn kind of mimics Milioti in her performance as Freddy: it is Freddy who first realizes something is terribly wrong in the world of *It's Buddy*. Kudos go out to Tristan Borders (who I knew I recognized, but just couldn't place—he played young Calvin in *The Righteous Gemstones*) who helps provide some comedic relief as goody goody character Oliver.

In terms of voice work, Keegan-Michael Key is unrecognizably unhinged as the titular Buddy. Buddy is a straight up sinister, narcissistic version of Barney, and it is hilarious to hear his reactions to the mutiny undertaken by his beloved children. A much more recognizable voice is Patton Oswalt, who plays Strappy, the talking backpack.

I don't want to divulge too much of *Buddy's* plot, as it is for sure better to go in as blind as you possibly can, but I will say that I wish the film had explored some of its mysteries a little deeper. By the end you're left with many more questions than answers, and that seems to be by design, as Kelly *does* plant the seeds for further adventures in the *It's Buddy* universe.

It's hysterical to me the press that *Buddy* has been getting due to parents taking their kids to the movie without knowing its content. The pearl clutching is especially cute, considering that,

despite a few scenes with some *actually* gnarly, practical effects gore, *Buddy* is much more *Gremlins*-level horror than it is anything *truly* scary. Hell, for comparison, I found the Firefly Funhouse segments on WWE television a handful of years ago to be much more unnerving and scary once the Fiend was revealed (Bray Wyatt would have *loved* this movie, or sued them for gimmick infringement, either way)!

While I will say that *Buddy* is **a lot** of fun—I enjoyed the hell out of it, from the analog aesthetic, to the funny little jabs it throws at the genre itself—it isn't the most frightening thing you'll see this year by any means. What it is though, is a unique, tongue-in-cheek throwback that will provide a good enough time at the movies while not making it so you can't sleep at night; although it may make you rethink the shows we watched all those years ago, and just how creepy those "friends" really were!