

## NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM \_ 7 / 10

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### *Solid family fare that edifies, inspires, and entertains*

*Written by Robert Ben Garant and Thomas Lennon*

*Directed by Shawn Levy*

Ben Stiller ... Larry Daley  
Carla Gugino ... Rebecca  
Dick Van Dyke ... Cecil  
Mickey Rooney ... Gus  
Bill Cobbs ... Reginald  
Jake Cherry ... Nick Daley  
Ricky Gervais ... Dr. McPhee  
Robin Williams ... Teddy Roosevelt  
Kim Raver ... Erica Daley  
Paul Rudd ... Don  
Mizuo Peck ... Sacajawea

Never a huge Ben Stiller fan, I was pleasantly surprised after picking *Night at the Museum* out of the Netflix mailer and firing it up on the DVD player. It's a story about a fella in a busted marriage just trying to get by in the Big Apple. Larry Daley (Stiller) has a creative, inventive orientation—he supposedly developed a light that turns on when you snap your fingers—but his inventions are always scooped, ahead of their time, or missing capital funding. Thus he's always running low on rent money and his ex (Kim Raver) wonders if he's a positive influence on their boy Nick (Jake Cherry).

In the beginning of the movie, Larry drops by the plush apartment of his ex and her new fiancé Don (Paul Rudd)—a techno-business geek (emphasis-added) bond trader—with whom she and Nicky live. These opening scenes are easy to dismiss because many have seen the previews and are waiting for the dinosaurs to come alive and wreak havoc at the museum; but these instances of humanity are key to story. Stiller shows the kind-hearted angst of the aspiring father who, because of some bad breaks and naïveté, has been ejected from his son's life and replaced by a cipher. Rudd is perfect, too, as the shallow, good-natured stepfather to be.

Realizing his ex-wife means business about withholding Nicky until he settles down and becomes gainfully employed, Larry wonders if this latest visitation with his son will be one of the last. There are some funny moments as Larry gets way too involved in the boy's hockey game, then afterward, father and son have a heart to heart that's really poignant. Both Stiller and the young actor Jake Cherry—Cherry is nominated for a Young Artists' Award (the film receives a number of nominations from lesser-known awards' associations in various categories)—handle that bittersweet moment believably.

Comes next week, Larry must get a job, now.

Down at the employment office the lady (played by Stiller's real-life mother, Anne Meara) tells him there's this opening that's a little odd. She keeps sending people down there but they don't last a day: night watchman at the American Museum of Natural History.[1] So Larry, desperate, says he'll check it out.

He runs into the main characters there, the lovely docent Rebecca (Carla Gugino), the fussy curator Dr. McPhee (Ricky Gervais), and the three security guards—Cecil, Gus, and Reginald (played with gusto by Dick Van Dyke, Mickey Rooney (yup still feisty on this side of the grass), and Bill Cobbs)—who have been downsized out and whom Larry is replacing. Cecil is the ringleader and immediately you sense knows what's really going on in the building after hours; he hands Larry a set of instructions and tells him it's very important not to lose them. Larry soon sees what he's gotten himself into.

You could say the remainder of the movie is fairly predictable in its broad outlines. The fantasy part of the movie is mostly for kids or for laughs, but it also serves to invigorate creatures and historical figures that we typically in a museum setting experience as merely dead or irrelevant. Of the creatures who come out when the sun goes down, Dexter the Capuchin monkey is my favorite; though you can see "monkeycide" as a great temptation. My two favorite animating figures are Teddy Roosevelt (Robin Williams) and Sacajawea (Mizuo Peck). Robin Williams is like Gene Hackman: bringing a unique "presence" to any role he plays. As the determined roughriding president, Williams makes you feel what others must have felt aside such an unstoppable dynamo; we even get to see a softer side as he falls for the Indian guide.

There's something about Stiller's performance of Larry that just really hits the nail on the head for me—and keep in mind I can't think of another Ben Stiller movie that personally stands out—perhaps one of the reasons lies in his subtle pauses and cautious responses to the museum curator Dr. McPhee (Ricky Gervais) whose idea of a conversation is a hilarious one-way barrage of half-baked thoughts he forgets how to complete in sentences. Or the tentative yet considerate way Larry approaches Rebecca, and how he emotionally understands her long-term fascination with Sacajawea. I just find Stiller's character of Larry in the adult sequences convincing; he has a resilient sense of humor, expecting everything to work out through persistence.

In some ways this is the quintessential family man's movie: the message is don't give up your dreams, then life, your family, will come around to meet them. Plenty of emotional fuel for adult men (and women—there's a side plot involving Rebecca and her love of learning —) and plenty of adventure and fun for the kids.

I'm irked by most of the critics I've read—James Berardinelli's review is typical—who call this movie "lifeless." Why aren't they seeing this? First of all it's a family movie so all the animated and special-effects scenes are integral to the plot (and they're done exceptionally well), and second the serious portions of the film from Stiller's work to Robin Williams' portrayal of Teddy Roosevelt are perfectly in character. And what's more the characters are sympathetic even, in Roosevelt's case, rousing.

I don't like to psychologize, but maybe the groundless negativity comes with the territory of being a professional critic: you see so many movies your emotional gear becomes saturated and at the first sign of a flaw (say, the scenes involving the toy-soldier Romans and the miniature figures of the US Old West) you go so deep into your critic's reactive brain you don't center back to your heart and soul. This is an inspiring movie for adults, more so for children; I feel personally moved by history coming alive to move my butt down to a real museum, learn more about nature and history in general. It's an extremely lifeful movie and if you become as a child you'll love it.

It has potential to be a classic.

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[1] Filmed at the actual museum.

*2008 January 18*

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