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3 men, a cradle and a critic

Highly acclaimed French comedy is not so funny translated

By Stew Magnuson
Staff Reviewer

"3 Men and a Cradle"

Before I start this review of "3 Men and A Cradle," the French film showing this weekend at Sheldon, I would like to share a discovery I made about France and its films during my year-long stay there.

Movie Review

Contrary to what some film fans here may think, the French make just as many exploitation, idiotic action-adventure flicks and trashy films as Hollywood. It's just the cream of their crop that gets imported over here and plays in our art houses. I wish I could say the same for the American films imported over there.

I'm not suggesting that "3 Men and A Cradle" is trash, but it certainly isn't a very good film either. Millions of French people would disagree with me. The film has taken in more francs in France than "E.T.," "Rambo" or any other French film in the past 20 years. It won Ceasars (the French Oscar) for

the best screenplay, best supporting actor and the best film. Millions of French and the French Academy of Film can't be wrong, can they? No, they're not. But "3 Men and A Cradle" is a classic example of humor not translating into another language.

The story is about three wild and swinging Parsian bachelors who find an abandoned baby girl on their doorstep. One bachelor, Jacques (Andre Dussloier), tells his two roommates, Pierre and Michel, that he's expecting a package to be dropped of the day after he's flying off for three weeks in Thailand, and that someone will come by to pick it up the following Thursday.

Well, imagine their surprise when the package turns out to be a baby girl attached to a note that reads "Jacques, here is the fruit of our passion. I'm going to the states for six months."

In their confusion over how to care for an infant, Michel forgets another package that arrived via their concierge. That was the real package Jacques had referred to, and it happens to contain a small shipment of heroin.

After four mildly amusing days of Michel and Pierre trying to fit oversized diapers on the baby, the couriers come to pick up the package. Oops, Pierre and Michel assume they're there to pick up the kid. The two thugs take off with the baby before they figure out their mistake. While tracking down the child, a cop discovers something strange is going on. The cops think Pierre and Michel are dope smugglers, and the

real dealers want their drugs back. While the cops and dealers are breathing down the two bachelors' necks, the baby still needs to be cared for. Not a bad situation for a comedy. But this conflict gets resolved fairly quickly, and we still have another hour to sit through.

"3 Men and A Cradle" has what some film critics like to call "a problem with pacing." This means, quite simply, it's very boring in spots. After this initial conflict, the audience still has to sit through six months of caring for the child, the return of the baby's mother, and the emptiness the three bachelors feel after the baby is gone. Director Coline Serreau takes too long to make her points. She makes the six months really seem like six months.

In all fairness to France's taste in films, most of the humor is just lost on American audiences. Two French instructors here told me the way Andre Dussolier says his lines is quite hilarious. Of course, this is lost on an American audience reading subtitles. The scenes in which the three bachelors sing French lullabies also are quite funny, according to the two instructors. But for people not familiar with the lyrics or traditional French lullabies, these scenes are going to go nowhere.

"3 Men and A Cradle" is showing this Thursday through Sunday at 7 and 9:15 p.m., with two matinees on Saturday and Sunday at 3 p.m. Sunday night's screenings are at 5:15, 7:30, and 9:45 p.m.

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