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Caustic Comic Observations

Review of Mafalda the Movie

By Kat Avila | Web Published 7.12.2005

NOTE: This review may contain information that could be considered spoilers. Readers should proceed at their own risk.

Six-year-old Mafalda and her friends resemble Charlie Brown and the rest of the Peanuts gang, but they live in a middle-class Buenos Aires neighborhood and Quino's humor is more acerbic and politicized. The 1-1/2 hour Spanish-language animated movie is made up of 18 "live comic" sequences and comes with English subtitles.

"Don't miss this Latino classic, an amusing film, in which we will enjoy more scatterbrained adventures. A critical vision of the world of the adults that will make us pass a funny moment" is what it says on the back of the DVD case. Luckily the quality of the English subtitles is much better, with the translation favoring British English, e.g., "mummy" for "mommy" and "telly" for "television."

It is possible to enjoy the animation without being familiar with the comic strip. The first five minutes introduces all the featured comic characters: the soup-hating Mafalda; her housewife mama; her businessman papa; and her buddies, the Walter Mitty-type dreamer Felipe, snobbish mother-in-training Susanita (Susana), social observer Miguelito (Miguel), and materialistic Manolito (Manolo), who one day will certainly own a chain of supermarkets. (The endings "-ita" and "-ito" are diminutive suffixes that express endearment.) Not seen are Libertad and Mafalda's little brother Guille, both of whom appear in later comic strips. They are included in a group picture stamped on the DVD disk, but they are not in any movie scenes.

"Good morning, Mama. Do you know if they've banned nuclear weapons yet?" innocently asks Mafalda. This big-hearted little girl — with a prominent red bow on top of a mop of short thick black hair — has a way of unnerving the adults around her with uncommon questions. Many of these questions are unfortunately directed toward her father and mother when they are trying to sleep.

An everyday household chore such as Mafalda helping her mother dust becomes a parental test of patience. Looking at a globe of the Earth, the precocious child asks, "Should I clean all the countries ... or just the ones with bad governments?" Mafalda is preoccupied with international events, e.g., the Cold War, and worries about the future of humanity. She's a "Peace & Love" poster girl.

About a half hour into the animation, Mafalda begins first grade. "The moment has arrived," sighs her father shedding a tear. "Yes, her first day of school," responds her mother with a brave smile. Some of the funniest moments in the film are Mafalda and her friends trying to make sense of the educational system.

When the school children are teasing Mafalda because her family doesn't own a television, the scene can still strike a chord by transposing the TV with, for instance, a PlayStation 2 computer entertainment system. "Weapons of mass destruction" can be substituted in for references to the atomic bomb, and tension in



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the Middle East for the Cold War. In this way, Quino's caustic observations remain as relevant today as they were forty years ago.

There are ten books of Mafalda comic strips. Toda Mafalda is the entire collected works. None of the comics have been translated into English, though they have been translated and published in Italian, French, and even Chinese. The World of Quino published in the U.S. in 1986 consisted mostly of wordless cartoons unrelated to the comic strip. Therefore, the animation is a good introduction to Mafalda because of the English subtitles. One cautionary note, as witty as the punchlines are, the film can get boring and painful toward the end (information overload) because of the repetitive pattern of setup and punchline. Mafalda the Movie is best consumed in half-hour doses of six scenes at a time, which can be done through the main menu.

This review was originally published in Sequential Tart, February 2005. Mafalda the Movie is available from Venevision International.

Kat Avila is currently reading Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, the prequel to his book Reinventing Comics.

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(323) 259-0388 Fax (310) 496-2972 info@latinola.com

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