

HER FAMILY / HIS™

Reviewing Family Entertainment



HERS

The summer entertainment season is always “Much Ado About Nothing.” It is a media blitz full of “Sound and Fury” but, at the end of the day, it “Signifies Nothing.” In terms of family entertainment, 2004 has been a disappointment. It promised much but delivered little.

Nature, not the cinema, provided one of the high points for my family’s summer entertainment. We took a day trip to Santa Cruz Island. This was our first outing with the Island Packers. We boxed up our picnic, drove to the Ventura Harbor, boarded the catamaran, and trekked across the channel towards the perfectly preserved Channel Islands that make-up California’s outer banks. It was one of those rare family adventures that is captured in every parent’s collective unconscious as an ideal. We hiked together up the cliffs of the island and when we reached the top we had a picnic on the rock, laughed with each other and took in one of the most magnificent ocean panoramas beautifying this planet. The day ended with a climax of splendid serendipity when the Captain’s voice excitedly announced, “Dolphin feeding frenzy ahead.” Bolting for the bow, there was a giant swirl of white water that looked like a special effect whirlpool from “Journey to the Center of the Earth.” Literally thousands of dolphins were drumming the water with their bodies, creating a musical water wheel and herding dinner into the center of their clan. Thousands of sea birds hovered close over the churning white caps and helped themselves to dinner at the expense of the dolphins’ collective work. It was a rare sight anywhere in the world, made especially precious when it was just miles from my home, off the coast of southern California. What a perfect day to be a family. What a perfect entertainment for all of us.

Basking in the glow of this glorious outing, we took our fourteen-year-old to a private screening of a new independent film, *Benji: Off the Leash!* It seemed like a perfect activity since we are all great supporters of independent artists, especially filmmakers. We had already spent an afternoon visiting with Joe Camp, the creator of the entire Benji franchise, so we had special insight into the vision that sparked this revival. Joe Camp recounted through anecdote the discovery of the new Benji in an animal shelter in Mississippi and how this special dog had come to be an inspiration to animal shelters across the nation raising both awareness and badly needed money through the SAVE BENJI’S BUDDIES program and foundation. Like us, Joe Camp himself is also a true believer in the power of independent film to change the business ethic of Hollywood. “I think there are enough Benji lovers to rally the families to get up, get out and speak with their tickets - enough to make Hollywood listen.” Joe’s own words are a rally cry to an independent artist.

Unfortunately, it takes more than enthusiasm, anecdotes, and a cute dog to get people up and out to the movies. It takes a good story and a well-written script and *Benji: Off the Leash!* suffers from a lack of both of these primary ingredients. It is one thing to be a crusading producer but you have to be careful that the pioneering work is excellent at all costs. As an independent producer the artist is a champion for all independent voices and, if you bore the viewer, it will be twice as hard to get the audience, especially the family audience, to the theater the next time. *Benji: Off the Leash!* was well produced, well scored, well filmed but poorly written. I’d encourage you to miss the film but, if you are looking for a new pet, let the enthusiasm of Benji push you into an animal shelter. That message from Benji is well founded.



HIS

From my point of view, summertime sort of slides onto the calendar scene like that overbearing, presumptive Uncle who invites himself to the party with the predictable tendency to stay too long. I’m an autumn person. Come September, So. Cal. summers just seem to drag like an oversized anchor on an undersized boat.

It’s the one season of the year that makes the pointer of my wanderlust compass go awry. On one hand, I’d just as well stay home and be lazy. On the other hand, I fidget and fuss to get out into the world to explore new curiosities and uncharted destinations. Summer night drives somehow feel the freest. Whether you stray far or stay near, September holds many alternatives to fulfill the promises and belated plans for summer’s end.

An unusual yet inexpensive way to get off the coast of California for the day is to charter a boat from Ventura Harbor and cruise to Santa Cruz Island about an hour away. Our family isn’t especially what I’d call “sea worthy,” and I’m certainly no ‘ol salt, but nautical skills needed to take this voyage aren’t required. What an utterly exhilarating trip! I recommend you go topside (you can get out of the wind by going into an enclosed cabin on the lower deck) for the best view of the seascape. My son and I grabbed onto the bow’s railing and rode out the swells beside the Captain and his 2-man crew. At times, it felt like staying on a mild-spirited bucking bronco! This is the boat’s hot spot for the kids. For those passengers seeking a calmer ride (Suzanne included), the upper deck’s rear benches give you a great vantage point minus the bumps.

Santa Cruz Island invokes images of Jurassic Park without the dinosaurs. The good news is it’s devoid of snakes. It remains uncommercialized, so be prepared to bring your own food and beverage. And this is a novel concept for our disposable age - whatever you bring to the island, you also have to take with you. There are NO garbage cans or disposals. Ahhh...not a Golden Arch in sight. You are hard pressed to find even a shred of litter anywhere there. We were given a brief introduction by a very cool park ranger (partially managed by The Nature Conservancy and The National Park Service) and expediently sent on our way. This is a hiker’s paradise, with several vertical or less vertical paths to choose from. If you don’t mind a moderate climb, the path up to the cliff’s edge is more than doable for those in minimal physical shape, and the stunning view across the ocean delivers a huge pay off for the effort. You can make this a half-day experience if you rush, but I suggest the island disconnect is worth your entire day. Be sure to make it back to the pier for your scheduled departure. If you miss your boat, Santa Cruz Island’s nocturnal inhabitants await you!

Regarding the family film, *Benji: Off the Leash!*, this story about a beloved dog goes “oink, oink” instead of “ruff, ruff.” This uninspired film suffers from a stinker of a script, the latest franchise installment from Joe Camp, its creator, director and screenwriter. It’s my job to evaluate a movie from start to finish, but if not for a professional commitment to this review, I’d have left the screening after its first twenty minutes (or is that frames?) of play. As an obvious dog lover, Mr. Camp wants us to enter into the dogs’ telepathic communication throughout the film, but alas, I finally couldn’t get on their wavelength. If you own a dog or pet, I suggest you bypass this film and spend some quality time with your pet instead.

Enjoy the slow burn of summer’s end.

Both having degrees in theater and having studied in Oxford and Paris respectively, Suzanne and Chris Shoemaker have worked as freelance artists and writers in England, Canada, France, China and Hawaii. They now call Los Angeles their home where they live with 3 three sons and 2 grandsons. They can be reached at suzanne@actsofcreation.com or chris2@actsofcreation.com.