

# *The Boxtrolls*: A cartoonish glimpse of class society

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*Directed by Graham Annable and Anthony Stacchi; written by Irena Brignull and Adam Pava; based on Here Be Monsters!, the novel by Alan Snow*

In making *The Boxtrolls*, Laika, the American stop-motion animation studio, should be commended for making one of the few children's films that makes an effort to touch upon serious issues. Their latest 3D animated film places social inequality front and center.

However, sincerity is not everything. It is difficult to address seriously issues without understanding them. The filmmakers' view that social inequality and oppression have primarily cultural roots, or roots in individual lack of courage, severely limits their work. *The Boxtrolls* is set in the vaguely Victorian-era city (although with deliberate anachronisms) of Cheesebridge. The city is governed by the White Hats, a council of elite cheese connoisseurs largely unconcerned with the city's affairs except when it has something to do with cheese. The eponymous boxtrolls are literally an underclass living beneath the city streets, emerging only at night to pilfer whatever scraps they can use to build new gadgets. Each boxtroll is named after the box he or she wears; "Shoe" wears a box that once held shoes, and so on.

Cheesebridge's resident exterminator, Archibald Snatcher (the voice of Ben Kingsley), convinces Lord Portley-Rind (Jared Harris), the leader of the White Hats and mayor, that the city's boxtrolls are a threat to their cheese. Portley-Rind agrees to grant Snatcher his own white hat, in exchange for the extermination of every boxtroll.

Eggs (Isaac Hempstead-Wright), a human orphan whom the boxtrolls have raised as one of their own, is the only one who attempts to fight for their survival. Portley-Rind's neglected daughter, Winnie (Elle Fanning), is sympathetic and agrees to bring their case

to her father.

To its credit, *The Boxtrolls* is not a film satisfied with the status quo. It condemns the callousness of Cheesebridge's ruling elites, who shrug off reports of crumbling infrastructure and divert money meant for building children's hospitals to produce giant wheels of cheese.

Over the course of 10 years of pest control, the boxtrolls' numbers dwindle; meanwhile Eggs grows into adolescence. Threatened with orphanhood once again, Eggs asks his adoptive father, Fish (Dee Bradley Baker), why they hide and carry on as if everything's fine: "They drag us away and we do nothing."

Unfortunately, the filmmakers take some of this much too lightly. It reaches the point where social conventions and accessories, such as the prestigious hats, standards of etiquette and even the boxes of the boxtrolls, though lampooned to great effect, ultimately receive more attention than kidnapping and murder.

It is not that comedy has no place in works dealing with serious subjects (See: *Train de Vie*). But a genuinely pointed satire would have involved the filmmakers focusing their gaze much more sharply than they have here.

Disappointingly, *The Boxtrolls* lacks the sophistication, wit and humanity of Laika's previous feature, *ParaNorman* (2012). The film too often substitutes sensationalist effects for compelling story and action sequences for the maturation of its characters.

Winnie's keen interest in the macabre, the result of both her unexciting, sheltered upbringing and Cheesebridge's (manufactured) bloody hysteria against the boxtrolls, comes off as troubling and unhealthy, but is humorously celebrated by the film. Lord Portley-Rind trades his social standing in exchange for his

daughter's life with the same tired vexation he displays while ignoring her complaints. Eggs' newfound understanding of human (and boxtroll) nature is boiled down to the banal realization that "people can act differently and society's boxes are limiting."

Truly affecting moments, brought to life thanks to Laika's skilled modelers and animators, are few and far between. *The Boxtrolls* is visually stunning and graphic—but not always for the better. One cringes at the sight of Eggs regurgitating cheese and then eating it again—equally out of disgust, and the pain of seeing the artists' talents wasted on petty gross-out humor. And for all the film's insistence that none of the characters is truly evil, it goes out of its way to make the villain an odious monster who is unpleasant to even look at, particularly during his allergic reactions to cheese.

Though Laika is unparalleled in the craft of stop-motion animation, technical skill does not necessarily translate into *substance*. Like many contemporary works of fantasy, *The Boxtrolls* crafts an elaborate, eye-popping world that remains too far removed from reality. The quaint, quasi-Dickensian setting is there primarily for its striking appearance, not because the filmmakers thought it was needed to tell the story.

The animations are expressive and fluid; the sets, puppets and wardrobes meticulously crafted; the lighting appealing and warm. Yet, Cheesebridge is not genuinely tangible. The streets never convey the sense that people live or work in them. *The Boxtrolls* is not entirely devoid of meaningful insight. At its climax, Eggs makes a salient point to the boxtrolls about the leverage they, as builders, hold over Snatcher. Whatever they are forced to construct, they are also fully capable of taking apart.

Unfortunately, the film's ultimate message appears to be something of a cliché: if only people knew they could think (or act) outside the box!



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