

Showtime's *Kidding* with Jim Carrey: Everyone has a breaking point

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20 November 2018

Significant drama and comedy help make sense of a complicated, often heart-breaking world. It shows life with its countless interconnections, contradictions, twists and turns—a cutaway image of an unfolding social process. The new Showtime series *Kidding* demonstrates how effectively the medium of television can depict a number of people—old, young, wealthy, healthy, unhealthy, famous, ordinary and more—doing the best they can in turbulent circumstances.

At the center of *Kidding* stands an internationally beloved puppeteer and children's show host, the Fred Rogers-inspired Jeff Piccirillo (Jim Carrey), or “Jeff Pickles” as he is known, who is struggling to navigate the loss of his son and to maintain the success of his children's television program, *Mr. Pickles' Puppet Time*. Everyone adores Mr. Pickles. Throughout *Kidding* we learn that Mr. Pickles' inspirational, funny, confidence-building and tolerance-pushing puppeteering has inspired drug addicts to get clean, and car thieves to remorsefully return his PT Cruiser (though one wheel doesn't match).

At every encounter the public expresses gratitude and admiration for the man who “is in their living room alone with their kids.” Late night television host Conan O'Brien, who has Pickles as a guest, along with the rough-and-tumble Danny Trejo, appears out of touch with the audience, even his own cameramen, as they join in singing the theme song of *Mr. Pickles' Puppet Time*, “You can feel ... anything at all, anything at all is fine; it's you who's doing the feeling, and that makes it okay ...” From the outset the viewer is drawn to Pickles, wants to follow him and cheer him on.

As the series begins, Mr. Pickles has separated from his wife Jill (Judy Greer), who now dates a doctor at the hospital where she works—specifically, in the Jeff Pickles' Children's Wing of the hospital.

The deceased son, Phil, looms large. He was a twin, and clearly his father's favorite. Will Pickles (Cole Allen), the surviving twin, is a pale reflection of his brother. Instead of magic tricks and philanthropy, he prefers pranks, foul language, cataloguing sensational homicides and marijuana. Nothing about his father's gentle, pedagogic persona resonates with him.

Mr. Pickles and his estranged wife process Will's death quite differently. Looking to make the best of a rotten situation, Mr. Pickles gives money to the now disabled driver of the box truck that collided with Jill's minivan, resulting in Will's death. He views the entire tragic accident—both the minivan and the truck had a green light by some error of a traffic signal device—as an opportunity to bring their two families together. For her part, Jill hates the man and desperately wants the seemingly detached Mr. Pickles to join in this hatred. It's a chasm just as unbridgeable as it is completely understandable, with neither person tarred as the “bad guy.” Both come across as human beings coping with tragedy, pulled apart by circumstances, as if by a fault line opening between their feet.

At work, Mr. Pickles constantly perturbs his father Seb (Frank Langella), who produces *Mr. Pickles' Puppet Time* for the Public Broadcasting Service. Seb is a human balancing act, personifying the harsh realities of show business on the one hand—the Mr. Pickles brand is the only thing keeping PBS financially viable, a predicament which echoes the actual condition of public broadcasting in the US—and fighting to keep his family functional on the other.

When Jeff wants to push boundaries—introducing children to everything from the grieving process to gender fluidity to the phrase “Allahu akbar” [the Islamic phrase meaning “Allah (God) is [the] greatest”], which he explains is used mainly “as a

greeting, like we say ‘hello,’ ‘good-bye. Or [in Hawaii] ‘aloha’”—Seb puts out feelers for a way to keep the Mr. Pickles brand alive while retiring his son.

Jeff’s methods generate comic results that contrast sharply with his deadpan personality. Seb hires the bratty, self-obsessed figure skater Tara Lupinski for “Pickles on Ice” and a Croatian voice imitator to transition Mr. Pickles into a cartoon.

Some of the peripheral characters incorporate the most interesting subject matter. In one particularly strong episode, Mr. Pickles attends the lethal injection viewing of his pen pal, a working class man and talented illustrator condemned by circumstance to a cruel and senseless end. PBS doesn’t want its standard-bearer anywhere near the execution of a convicted murderer. Jill is skeptical at best, but agrees to a dinner with the family of the doomed convict and her own. Will’s insensitivity to Derrell (Alex Raul Barrios), the convict’s son, infuriates Mr. Pickles.

Derrell’s account of his father’s mental breakdown captures the ugly social causes behind the pitiless, hypocritical and class-based justice system. Not a stranger to harsh circumstances, Derrell sees the unmistakable signs of Mr. Pickles’ impending collapse. Without giving the episode away, his statement, “everyone has a breaking point” comes full circle.

To the immense credit of those involved in the show, *Kidding* manages to teach without pedantry, and even to advocate without preaching. The characters in all their interactions and challenges, ring true. Judy Greer shines as the down-to-earth Jill; Catherine Keener succeeds in the difficult role of Deidre, Mr. Pickles’ subdued sister and chief puppet maker (she gets no *voice* in the family show, or in the family generally).

Executive producer Michel Gondry (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind; Be Kind, Rewind*) brings his characteristic imaginative thoughtfulness to the work, with surrealistic and comic elements. Carrey, who has proven himself capable of more than his earlier, shall we say, simpler films, *Dumb and Dumber* and *Ace Ventura, Pet Detective*, fills out Mr. Pickles in all his dimensions with energy and skill. Even as the title character in the 1996 film *The Cable Guy*, Carrey showed a knack for the darker recesses of a lonely soul. *The Truman Show* (1998) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) were both thoughtful works, hard to imagine without Carrey at their center.

When receiving the Charlie Chaplin Britannia Award this past October for outstanding comedic acting Carrey made comments that referred to the award’s namesake: “Chaplin alchemized his pain, turned it into art: exquisite, timeless, healing art. Without empathy like that the character [the Tramp] would never have existed, and without empathy, we won’t either. With *Modern Times* he criticized capitalism without a conscience, and that’s what we have now. He showed the common man being fed through the gears of a brutal, dehumanizing industrial age. He took on the American right wing of his day, its worst evils: hatred of immigrants, contempt for the truth, greed and the abuse of power. We are fighting those same evils today... [Referring to the US government policy of separating immigrant families] Kidnapping children is not what great nations do.”

It’s no exaggeration to say there is a little Chaplin in Carrey and it’s desperately needed. One can learn more about American society in a single episode of *Kidding* than in a hundred hours of CNN, NBC, CBS news punditry and “analysis.” Showtime has signed off on a second season of *Kidding*. The market for honesty, seriousness, craftsmanship and perhaps most important, empathy in entertainment exists, where the old Roman playwright’s adage prevails: nothing human is alien to me.



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