

Theme taints 'family' film

David DiCerto/CNS

NEW YORK (CNS) — A spoiled New York party princess is transformed into a responsible grown-up by an unlikely, pint-sized fairy godmother in the contemporary storybook comedy "Uptown Girls."

While clearly geared toward young audiences, director Boaz Yakin's otherwise effervescent tale is tarnished by a sexual permissiveness that seems to run counter to the film being marketed as family fluff, pushing the limits of its PG-13 envelope.

Molly Gunn (Brittany Murphy) is the 22-year-old freewheeling daughter of a late rock-guitar legend. Her life of privilege consists of one big party, with time taken out only for shopping sprees which would give Elle Woods of "Legally Blonde" a run for her daddy's money, jumping into bed with rock 'n' roll musicians, and walking her pet pig. But fate pours a healthy dose of reality into her silver spoon when her accountant makes for the border with her inheritance, leaving Molly flat broke and up to her eyeballs in debt.

Forced to enter the work force, Molly lands a position as nanny to the precociously uptight, 8-going-on-40 Ray (Dakota Fanning). Neurotic and Napoleonic, Ray initially responds to Molly's friendly overtures with derision and distrust.

Through a formulaic series of personality clashes — which feel less forced and cliched in large part due to the genuine on-screen chemistry between Murphy and Fanning — Molly discovers that Ray's guardedness is a defense erected as a way of



MGM/CNS

Brittany Murphy stars with 9-year-old Dakota Fanning in the comic film "Uptown Girls."

dealing with her absent, workaholic mother (Heather Locklear), a high-powered record-producer. Anxiety over her father's terminal comatose condition has also driven Ray further into her emotional shell.

As Ray's iciness slowly thaws, the two girls begin to pick up the pieces of their mutually fractured lives, leading to mawkishly predictable epiphanies about family and friendship. Ray, who seems to have been born mature, learns to enjoy being a child, while Molly, who has yet to stop acting like one, decides it is

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time to grow up.

Murphy, whose facial elasticity is at once both buoyant and grating, brings a bubbleheaded bliss to her role, but it is Fanning's germ-obsessed enfant terrible — think Woody Allen in pigtails — who steals the show.

The film suffers from a bipolar narrative, never establishing a tone or target audience, seesawing awkwardly between lighthearted comedy and drama.

At its heart the film offers a positive, family-values message, touching on weighty issues like emotional healing and parental neglect. Regrettably, these themes must compete with a subplot involving Molly's relationship with a British guitarist (Jesse Spenser), which adds a lewd sexual element to the story, proving the movie's breezy family-targeted promos grossly misleading.

Due to several implied sexual encounters and dark emotional themes, as well as sporadic crude language, the USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

DiCerto is on the staff of the Office for Film & Broadcasting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Video reviews

NEW YORK (CNS) — The following are video capsule reviews from the Office for Film & Broadcasting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Theatrical movies on video have a USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification and Motion Picture Association of America rating.

'AGENT CODY BANKS'

Juvenile comedy in which a 15-year-old CIA recruit (Frankie Muniz) teams with an older sexpot agent (Angie Harmon) to foil a plot that would allow a megalomaniac (Ian McShane) to control the world using microscopic robots. Frequent stylized violence, mild sexual innuendo and some rude humor. The USCCB classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The MPAA rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

'BROTHER'S KEEPER'

Compelling documentary about the Ward brothers, four illiterate and elderly dairy farmers in upstate New York, one of whom is put on trial for the 1990 mercy killing of an older brother. The film provides an eloquent portrait of the rural community which regarded the brothers as eccentric but harmless recluses and came to the defense of the accused brother whom they believed incapable of murder. Some complex justice questions and a graphic scene of a pig being slaughtered. The USCCB classification is A-III — adults. Not rated by the MPAA.

'SPIDER'

Bleak psychological drama about a mentally ill man (Ralph Fiennes) living in a decrepit London halfway house who struggles to discover the dreadful truth about the death of his mother (Miranda Richardson) as his frail mental state declines. Director David Cronenberg spins together muddled childhood memories in a disturbed adult mind in this stark film with a chilling ending, but the deliberate, grinding pace grows wearisome. A few sexual situations, brief violence, fleeting nudity and a few instances of rough language. The USCCB classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

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