

Bears the stars in Gremlins

By IAN BAILEY
Two summers ago Steven Spielberg, the Michael Jackson of summer movies, demonstrated his talents with two simultaneously released films.

He directed E.T. and produced and wrote the story for Poltergeist. It was a Spielberg summer.

The forthcoming weeks will seem similar: Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, which Spielberg directed, is already making its mark. On Friday, June 8, Gremlins, for which Spielberg gets credit as one of three executive producers opens at Markville Cinemas.

I saw Gremlins a few weeks ago when it was previewed in Toronto. It's a quirky horror story combining the bouyant spirit of E.T. with Poltergeist's flamboyant terror.

Though Gremlins has Steven Spielberg presents... above its title, it is more distinctly marked by the style of its director Joe Dante than by Spielberg.

A number of actors get top billing for the film, but the real stars are mysterious teddy-bear-like creatures known as Mogwai.

Initially they are so cute that they accomplish the miracle of melting cynical hearts determined to remain cool in the face of what seems another E.T.

However, no sooner are they established as the cutest things since Ewoks, do we discover that Mogwais have split personalities. They may be cute, but one careless moment produces a horde of malicious creatures.

In the movie, the quiet Ohio town of Kingston Falls discovers this fact thanks to the misguided benevolence of one of its citizens, Rand Peltzer (Hoyt Axton). As Gremlins opens he is in San Francisco's Chinatown searching for a Christmas present for his teenage son (Zach Galligan).

He finds an antique shop operated by a mysterious proprietor (Keye Luke), and buys a Mogwai. The creature comes with three warnings — never feed him after midnight, never expose him to sunlight and never let water touch him.

All three things happen and the result is a nightmare for Kingston Falls that is, by turns, hilarious and horrifying. The initial Mogwai is nice, but a horde of clones produced from the one creature are not.

What makes the movie so entertaining is the manner in which humor and horror are neatly combined without one cancelling the other out.

This style seems to come easily to director Dante. In 1981 he directed The Howling, a movie about a colony of werewolves. Last year his work was seen in one of the episodes in The Twilight Zone movie, a hilarious tale of a boy able to turn fixtures of his imagination into reality.

Both movies were alternately funny and chilling, exercises populated by human grotesques transplanted from the real world into the reality of their situations. They were campy and cheeky films that demonstrated that fear and laughter can lie closely together in horror movies.

Gremlins is an effective extension of this approach. Though there is a serious vein running through the proceedings it is just enough to provide a firm foundation from which Dante can occasionally diverge. The result is a movie that often seems like a

tongue-in-cheek version of The Birds. Sometimes, however, the contradiction between humor and horror renders the emotions of the characters irrelevant. Thus when Gremlins tries to take itself too seriously, it grinds to an awkward halt.

One example of this is a scene wherein the heroes girlfriend (Phoebe Kates) tells a story of domestic tragedy that might have turned ones stomach in a sombre film; but which seems like just another joke here. This occurs especially because it follows a hilarious scene in which the Mogwais tear a bar apart.

Gremlins human characters are often little more than well drawn cliches who fit the strange situation. As Peltzer, a daffy inventor of strange gadgets, Hoyt Axton seems like an 80s Fred MacMurray, lending credence to the nagging suspicion that beneath its excellence Gremlins is essentially an updated Disney film.

However, the movie retains an entertaining impact thanks to its real stars; the very convincing Mogwais.

Whether breakdancing, singing Christmas carols, watching Disney's Snow White or swarming for their attack on Kingston Falls, they possess an authenticity unseen

since E.T. landed in movie theatres. They seem like malicious muppets, who descend on Kingston Falls with all the devastating force of an unruly motorcycle gang. They're supernatural juvenile delinquents who drink, smoke and party like nothing you've ever seen. They are also the most welcome additions to this summers movie line up.

Gremlins opens at Markville Cinemas on June 8.

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