A quibble about the (very good) new Muppets movie

By Steve Thorngate
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Years ago I cringed when I saw that the *Onion* sells a t-shirt with the slogan, "I appreciate the Muppets on a much deeper level than you." My friend John and I had just been discussing the Muppets' sly use of metafictional elements--and it wasn't the first time we'd had this conversation. (We also used to sing "What's the Buzz?" from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, he as Kermit-as-Jesus and I as Piggy-as-Mary Magdalene. Guess which pastime entertained our friends more.)

Maybe America's Finest News Source is right: maybe it's silly to analyze the Muppets. But it's interesting that the *Onion* headline behind the t-shirt appears above a commentary disdainful of everything that came out after *The Muppet Movie*, the first feature film. The new movie *The Muppets,* which Nadia and I saw yesterday, begins from this same premise.

The Muppets that screenwriters Jason Segel and Nicholas Stoller want to revive are the crew that produced a variety show for several years and then starred as themselves in a classic road movie about going to Hollywood and making it big. The implicit message: things went downhill fast in the films that followed, and it's time to right the ship.

I won't defend the franchise's output after Jim Henson's death in 1990. In these movies, the Muppets simply appear as supporting characters in pre-existing stories. Kermit as Bob Cratchit! Miss Piggy as *Benjamina* Gunn!

It's all nominally amusing, as are the endless schlocky production numbers consisting largely of anonymous monsters, animals and food items singing brief solos as the camera drifts about as aimlessly as the script.

But right after *The Muppet Movie* came another Henson-directed film that deserves more love than it usually gets. Joke for joke, *The Great Muppet Caper* is at least as funny as *The Muppet Movie,* and it's far more ambitious. Kermit and Fozzie are identical twins working as journalists. Gonzo's their photographer, and Miss Piggy is an aspiring model. All are also aware that they're Muppets making a movie about characters who happen to share their names. This silly fourth-wall stuff is my favorite element of the Muppets universe, and it's most prominent in *The Great Muppet Caper.*

The new movie gives some nods to this audience-winking past, but it focuses on the Muppets as themselves--specifically, as washed-up entertainers years after the TV show and the first film. To be fair, this is a pretty funny premise, especially the plot point of Fozzie fronting a fake Muppets band that performs house-ad jingles at a Reno hotel.

Segel and Stoller get a lot of things right. They've reverently preserved the Muppets' essential guilelessness. Chris Cooper is a classic Muppet villain, but he and the other human characters are wisely put back in their supporting-cast place. Meanwhile, Fozzie is restored to his rightful position as Kermit's number two, while Kermit re-emerges as the voice of humane sanity who holds a community of insecure misfits together (see also, among others, Michael Bluth).

As for the songs (by Bret McKenzie of Flight of the Conchords), they blow away any Muppet music put out since Paul Williams and Kenneth Ascher's unassailable score for the first movie.

Still, I miss *The Great Muppet Caper*'s weirdly sweet trope: that the magic of make-believe exists in multiple layers of character that can't really be separated. Everyone's in on the joke; everyone's part of

the fun--Kermit the journalist, Kermit the actor/director/impresario, Henson the performer, Henson the director and Muppets creator, the viewer. Here's my favorite Muppets scene ever, an argument between Kermit and Piggy:

The best part is the end of the scene: they break character, argue about the scene, make up with each other, and resume work on the film--only to find that their characters aren't mad at each other anymore, either. No scripted dramatic conflict can outlast the deep love between frog and pig. When I was a kid, this scene blew my mind. It still does a little, even if this makes me *Onion*-worthy ridiculous.