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The opening scene of *Team America: World Police*, the latest ribald comic masterpiece from *South Park* creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker, is amongst the funniest vignettes ever filmed.



As the team in question, a band of jingoistic gun-toting marionettes, duke it out on the streets of Paris with hilariously stereotyped, weapon of mass destruction wielding terrorists, they manage to accidentally level the Eiffel Tower, the Arch de Triumph, and the Louver, leaving the centre of the city a steaming pile of rubble. In ten frenetic minutes Parker and Stone manage to satirise not just soldier of fortune diplomacy, but the films bizarrely chosen medium, puppetry; so acerbically and astutely that the hardened critics at the showing I attended were almost literally in tears.



While the film's remaining eighty-eight minutes don't possess quite the same distilled comic genius, they are undeniably entertaining. Ironically, just as the *South Park* boys have

chosen to adopt what could be perceived as their most adolescent medium yet - puppetry - they've managed to attain a satirical poignancy more adult than anything they've previously produced. Which is not to say that Team America doesn't contain more than its share of perversely offensive humour.

At times the movie ventures into territory at least as offensive as anything previous hit 'South Park: Bigger Longer & Uncut' dared to depict. Yet while South Park struggled to fill a feature length run time - recycling many of the TV series' staples, ultimately achieving little more than a mildly humorous extended episode; by contrast Team America manages to work as a coherent, entertaining film. Much of the movies humour is derived from producing a straightforward Bruckheimer style gung ho action movie, but with puppets. Parker and Stone push the kitsch just enough to elicit humour mingled with weary groans of familiarity, as one hoary old cliché after another is artfully skewered.



Like South Park, Team America is replete with offensive musical numbers, from 'Freedom Isn't Free' to 'Everyone has Aids', to 'I'm ronly' (a self piteous ballad lisped by Kim Jong Il); many of which are provided by Trey Parker. The songs are hardly Tony award winning material, but they ably send up both the action movie conventions parodied (the song 'Montage', explains the purpose of a montage, just as we're treated to one), and the teams well intentioned idiocy. Team America consist of a reluctant hero, Garry Johnson, recruited from a starring performance in Lease, a take on Broadway musical Rent; Lisa, a slutty psychologist; Sarah, a clueless empath; Joe, a macho weapons expert; Chris a martial arts guru; and Spottswood, a mocking tribute to *Thunderbirds* patriarch Jeff Tracy.



Oddly the film, supposedly so difficult to make that co-writer, performer and producer Matt Stone has pledged never to work friend and collaborator Parker again, has received mixed reviews, and opened to disappointing box office in the US. The mixed reviews are at least in part down to the films murky politics. When Team Americas premise, a satirical portrayal of a highly armed set of literal world policemen, was announced, many expected a film in vehement opposition to American military intervention abroad.



The final result however, takes a decidedly less partisan stance; one which has been accused of moral ambiguity and right wing militarism, as much as of treacherous criticism of the status quo. While the plot revolves around a clear parody of the war on terror, the elite US force at the centre of the movie are affectionately portrayed as good-natured incompetents rather than dangerous extremists. Stone and Parker (who together with South Park staff writer Pam Brady, co-wrote the film) reserve their satirical knives for the Hollywood elite, depicted as interfering opinionated fundamentalists, for Michael Moore, as an obese suicide bombing radical, and for North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il, the movies central villain, a megalomaniac midget with a speech impediment.



In interviews Stone has described the film as being about American optimism, as contrasted with the pessimistic perception of contemporary politics held by the rest of the world. Arguably suggesting Team America takes a warmongering stand would be going too far; if the film takes any definite position it's to mock the liberal conservative dichotomy that at times seems to reduce American politics to a parody. A point aptly demonstrated by the actor Sean Penn, who (presumably after having seen the film) sent a petulant open letter to Stone and Parker, decrying their apolitical stance, in a humourless manoeuvre similar to his characters behaviour in the movie.



Another controversial aspect to the film is the much talked about sex scene, which had to be cut for the film to attain an R rating in the US - a rating virtually essential for mainstream box office success. Whilst later scenes in the film depict extreme violence towards the puppet cast - marionettes are decapitated, torn apart by wild animals, shot, and explode - all gorily enough to compete with an early Peter Jackson zombie flick, it was this scene of anatomically incorrect (but athletically graphic) puppet sex that incurred the ire of the Motion Picture Association of America. This has led the film

makers to question what makes sex so contemptible to contemporary America, that it's depiction (even in puppet form) is more controversial than extreme violence.



Costing a mere thirty two million dollars to make, Team America has made the most of its constrained budget. Whilst the marionettes are mercilessly sent up by everything from visible strings to slapstick fistfights, they in fact look amazing. Working with a combination of cutting edge animatronics, intricately designed models and some of the world's foremost puppeteers, Parker (producing) and Stone (directing) have achieved a more sophisticated level of simulacra than Jim Henson, or Thunderbirds creator Gerry Anderson, ever dreamed possible. These puppets are capable of lip synch, emotive facial expressions, and when not been made to look intentionally foolish (a joke elaborated to brilliant excess throughout the film), tremendous physical articulatory.



Characters have stubble, eyelashes, scars and bruises, and well - act. The sets too are jaw droppingly detailed, from the Panama Canal to the forested Korean capitol Pyongyang. Sets both look fantastic, and are filmed with a cinematographic assuredness that rivals the best mainstream Hollywood action movie. They look even better exploding, and explode

they do, erupting into flames in almost every scene, as Team America tears apart the world they're attempting to save.



Not since the political puppet shows of the Middle Ages have marionettes been so ably used as tools of satire. And not often in recent years has a movie succeeded in alternately entertaining and offending so ably.

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The Final Word: While Team America stops short of its potential, it does succeed as an extremely watchable and amusing film. And yes, they kept in the puppet sex for the UK cut.