

When a Buddy Caper Picture Isn't

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“Robot & Frank” opens on Friday, August 17 at the Paris Theater and Angelika Film Center.

Running time: 90 minutes; Rated PG-13.

In the very near future, an aging man with memory trouble is given a home aid worker by his son. The man was once a burglar; the aid worker is a robot.

With that premise, a more conventional movie might have become a grimly sentimental story about aging alone; or it might have been a forgettable caper picture about a loveable rogue and his anthropomorphic sidekick. That “Robot & Frank” is more nuanced than either is a testament to the skill of its creators and to the flexibility available to a “small” production.

From the beginning, it's clear that Frank Weld (played by the redoubtable Frank Langella) can be a charmer, but he isn't a sweet old man. He's manipulative, he has a strained relationship with his family, and he shoplifts for the thrill of it. He is in denial of his failing memory, and doesn't hesitate to take out his frustrations on those around him.

His one rock in a sea of forgetfulness is the town library and its librarian, Jennifer (Susan Sarandon). Flirting with Jennifer is clearly the bright spot of Frank's day, but even that is threatened by time. Since

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After pushing Frank unsuccessfully to move into assisted living, his son Hunter finally comes up with a solution: a home aid worker. They can’t afford a human nurse, so Frank is given a robot programmed to improve his mental and physical health. As the Robot (voiced by Peter Sarsgaard) demonstrates its usefulness, Frank slowly opens up to it, and it becomes his friend. Frank’s health, temper, and mental abilities improve.

In a more sentimental story, a newly healthy Frank would try to repair his relationship with his family. Instead, he goes back to his old ways, planning a jewel heist that he presents to the Robot as an exercise that will help his mental and physical health. He justifies it to himself as a theft that will hurt only the company that insured the jewels. From that moment, the film moves inevitably to its conclusion—an odd sort of betrayal that could not have happened any other way.

“Robot & Frank” doesn’t look for a happy ending. The characters, from Frank to the Robot to Frank’s children, Hunter and Madison, are true to themselves. One of the best moments in the film comes when Madison, an anti-robot activist, finally breaks down and turns to the Robot for help after only a few days of taking care of her father. As in all well-built stories, everything that follows springs from the personalities of its characters.

Langella radiates gravitas like a neutron star; he makes Frank Weld compelling, and charming, even after we have seen the character for exactly what he is. There are a few moments where Langella’s portrayal of Weld is in danger of degenerating into a clichéd wiseguy, but Langella pulls away from the temptation in time.

The other cast members support Langella well. Liv Tyler is particularly effective as Weld’s flaky daughter Madison, desperate for her father’s affection, and James Marsden does a good job communicating Hunter’s frustration as the child of a selfish and manipulative parent, although his natural smirk threatens to betray him at inappropriate moments. Sarsgaard is not a standout as the Robot, but he isn’t supposed to be—he’s supposed to deliver his lines as a benevolent HAL 9000, and he does. The one false note is Susan Sarandon. This isn’t because of her performance, which is gentle and effortless, but because she is underused, and (even at 65) she looks too young to be Langella’s love interest.

Despite some confusing moments at the beginning, Jake Schreier’s direction is straightforward and effective. The camera shows us what we need to see, and the actors work together well. Christopher D. Ford, the writer, has turned a gag concept into something genuinely moving—especially the final shots of the movie, in which Frank confronts the consequences of his actions. Cinematographer Matthew J. Lloyd and Art Director Lisa Myers have conveyed a real sense of place. The only jarring technical note is the soundtrack, which is sometimes too loud and heavy-handed.

“Robot & Frank” is not a lighthearted caper picture, but it is a good movie, and worth seeing.

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Ted Rabinowitz is a writer based in New York.

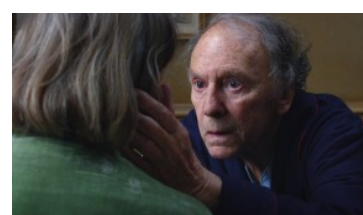
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