

Movie Review: 'The Secret Life of Pets'

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Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Back in 1995, the classic children's film "Toy Story" purported to show audiences what playthings get up to when they aren't being observed by people. Now "The Secret Life of Pets" (Universal) does much the same for domesticated animals.

The result is an entertaining animated free-for-all in which amusing characters and pleasing visuals of the Manhattan setting predominate over a serviceable but sketchy plot.

Terrier Max (voice of Louis C.K.) is the pampered pooch of New York apartment dweller Katie (voice of Ellie Kemper). Max's only complaint is that Katie's work separates them for much of the day.

While she's gone, though, Max is free to cavort with the other pets in the neighborhood, including Gidget (voiced by Jenny Slate), a fluffy Pomeranian who harbors a secret crush on him. With their owners absent, the animals not only communicate with one another, they act in all sorts of ways the humans never suspect.

Max's mostly pleasant routine is suddenly disrupted one evening when Katie brings home big, shaggy Duke (voice of Eric Stonestreet), a rescue dog from the pound. Though Duke initially tries his best to be friendly, Max, feeling threatened, rebuffs him. It's not long before the two sink into a rivalry that leads to the series of comic misadventures to which helmer Chris Renaud, together with co-director Yarrow Cheney, devotes most of his attention.

As Max and Duke go inadvertently on the lam — and struggle to evade the city's animal enforcement officers — they fall in with a variety of colorful personalities.

These include Snowball (voice of Kevin Hart), a diminutive rabbit whose manners, vocabulary and fondness for violence incongruously mimic those of a crazed gang leader, as well as a hawk named Tiberius (voice of Albert Brooks). Tiberius has an ongoing ethical dilemma: he's torn between his desire to befriend other creatures and his urge to devour them.

The upshot of it all is that Max and Duke's mutual hostility begins to melt away in the face of shared adversity. And romance blossoms as Gidget proves her mettle in Max's hour of need.

Targeted tots will learn lessons about accepting the arrival of a younger sibling and

about the value of self-sacrifice. The smallest moviegoers, however, may be put off by the dangers that loom on screen while some parents may not be pleased by all the litterbox humor on display there.

Those mild lapses in taste aside, “The Secret Life of Pets” makes for an experience as warm and fuzzy as a cuddle with your favorite puppy or pussycat. The feature is preceded by an animated short, “Mower Minions,” in which the pixilated creatures of the title attempt to raise some cash by doing yardwork — with predictably chaotic, and hilarious, consequences.

The film contains potentially frightening scenes of peril, considerable cartoon violence and numerous scatological jokes involving animals. The Catholic News Service classification is A-I — general patronage. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG — parental guidance suggested. Some material may not be suitable for children.

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