

Toopy and Binoo: Mind-numbing lovefest for the under-five set

BY HEATH MCCOY, CALGARY HERALD JANUARY 14, 2011

Presented By:



Heading to Toopy and Binoo (shown with Canadian puppeteer and voice-over artist who voices Toopy) today? Your kids will love you, but you may leave lighter in the wallet.

Spotlight

Toopy and Binoo, Jan. 15 at the Jubilee Auditorium. Shows at 1 and 4 p.m.

Of course, my three-year-old daughter's favourite cartoon has to be the one that drives me the battiest.

Toopy and Binoo - the Treehouse TV show turned live musical, which is coming to the Jubilee Auditorium today - is, for fully functioning adults, a mind-numbing lovefest.

Synopsis: Toopy, the perpetually giddy talking mouse is thrilled to be pals with Binoo the cat - his silent, but equally giddy, pint-sized sidekick - and the two go off on silly adventures together, created out of their imaginations.

It makes my eye cross and long for the cat and mouse cartoons of my youth. You know, the characters bent on murdering each other, like Tom and Jerry, or, their Simpsons spoof, Itchy and Scratchy.

But obviously the warm hugs, peaceful sentiments and tickle-me tales of Toopy (one episode is actually about Toopy tickling Binoo to make him smile) is the preferable show for my little girl, Bronwyn.

Like a lot of children's programs, Toopy is pure crack for kiddies. If I didn't limit her exposure, Bronwyn would zone out on these shows all day long, tantrums galore when torn away from Treehouse's

hypnotic glare. This I've learned the hard way.

Since becoming a parent I've been exposed to a universe which I barely knew existed: the multi-million dollar industry that is the kiddie entertainment biz. Take the Wiggles, the top entertainment earners from their native Australia for four years running. In 2009, making a mere \$45 million, they were dethroned by AC/DC, but they still far out-earned Keith Urban and Russell Crowe.

Dora the Explorer, another obsession of my daughter's, is seen in 151 markets and it's generated over \$11 billion in sales, according to Nickelodeon.

In Canada, Koba Entertainment, a branch of the Paquin Entertainment Group, is the king of all things kiddie, taking hit shows on the road spun off from every other program on Treehouse, including Franklin, Max & Ruby, Doodlebops and, yes, the beloved Toopy & Binoo.

Gilles Paquin, who founded Koba, says that Canada has long been a leader in family entertainment throughout the world, with a foundation that goes back to the 1970s with children's entertainers such as Raffi, Fred Penner and Sharon, Lois & Bram.

Paquin prides himself on the quality of the Koba productions.

"You can give children a lot of candy and they'll take it," he says. "But you don't want to give them too much candy. You want them to enjoy, but you want to enrich them at the same time."

Paquin feels the Treehouse programs have a depth which Koba tries to expand on with its extensive tours.

But Kate Newby, artistic director of the Calgary International Children's Festival is highly critical of kid's productions spun off from such franchises.

"It's commercial and it's eye candy," Newby says. "Usually there's a ton of merchandise attached to it. . . Quite often the kids are digging it for 10 minutes, then they get restless because there's not a lot of substance. . . ."

"As parents, you have to know what you're buying."

Newby's got a point. The children's entertainment business is booming and if you're not careful it will suck up your dollars faster than you can say "Swiper, no swiping."

Still, I can certainly think of worse things to capture Bronwyn's imagination than Toopy & Binoo, characters who, while crazily annoying, encourage her creativity.

And seeing my little girl's excitement when her favourite cat and mouse hit the stage will bring this daddy a whole lot of joy.

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