

When suburban Melbourne meets big city New York

Mary and Max

Writer/director - Adam Elliot

Producer – Melanie Combs

When *Harvey Crumpet* won an Oscar, creator Adam Elliot's astonishment etched across his face like one of his own claymation figurines. Five years on, Elliot and producer Melanie Combs give us *Mary and Max*, their first full length animated feature. Now, I don't know if *Mary and Max* will reach the same dizzying award season heights, but I do know it is a sweet, sad, serious story with a great deal of warmth and humour. It takes us all the way from the suburbs of Melbourne to big city New York, highlighting through difference just how similar the everyday human experience can be.

Mary and Max tells the story of Mary Dinkle, 8 years old, with "eyes the colour of muddy puddles" and a birthmark "the colour of poo." Her mother a declining alcoholic, her father increasingly retreating to his shed, the desperately lonely Mary writes randomly to Max, a 44 year old, morbidly obese New Yorker with Asperger's Syndrome. The film charts their subsequent twenty year friendship.

By turns delightful and melancholy, the film's gentle humour can catch you by surprise, such as Max's imaginary friend, Mr. Ravioli, who sits in the corner reading self help books. Similarly, moments of anxiety are explicitly, if unevenly, presented. Max's breakdowns, increasing in severity, are gently paced, yet Vera's death surrounded by stuffed wild birds is dramatic and intense. The stop-motion animation is precise and full of fine detail, from Mount Waverly's koala letterboxes to the New York beggar's cardboard sign: "keep your money, I want change."

Mary's suburban Melbourne world is shaded in warm brown tones, friendly and inclusive, yet just as lonely as the high contrast, stark greys and blacks of Max's high rise New York. The characters are all superbly voiced, but it is Phillip Seymour Hoffman who stands out as Max, giving us such a well rounded, human portrayal that we always see the man and never the syndrome. "I like being an Aspie", Max declares, for trying to cure him would be to change him, "it would be like trying to change the colour of my eyes."

Aspergers, alcoholism, death, divorce, mental illness, suicide. This film deals with the weightiest of subjects, yet because it treats them as part of ordinary, everyday life, it avoids being weighed down. Instead, we get a sweet tragicomic tale of friendship and acceptance, of a flawed world and imperfect humanity. From Les' agrophobia to Damien's stuttering, no character in this film is perfect, yet every character is perfectly human. *Mary and Max* is all the more moving for it.