

Review: 'R.I.P.D.' is DOA



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The new supernatural action comedy “R.I.P.D.” deals with life after death, but if the hereafter isn’t more entertaining than this, no one’s going want to go. “R.I.P.D.” clocks in at a very modest hour and 36 minutes, but feels far longer. If you’re going to consign audiences to purgatory, it seems unfair to make them pay for it.

Ironically, this is one of the few major studio releases this summer that’s neither a sequel nor a remake, and yet this movie suffers from nothing quite so much as a total bankruptcy of imagination. “R.I.P.D.” rips off “Men in Black” and “Ghostbusters” while managing to muster the energy or entertainment value of neither. This is a movie that pretty much rolls over and plays dead from the get-go.

Ryan Reynolds plays Nick, a Boston cop who’s just gone dirty, hanging to some contraband gold during a drug bust. Although all he wanted to do was buy some security for his wife (Stephanie Szostak of “Iron Man 3”), his crime is weighing on him and he tells his partner Bobby (Kevin Bacon) that he wants to turn the gold in. Bacon, who might as well be wearing an “I’m the bad guy” tattoo on his forehead, then promptly guns Nick down during a raid on a meth lab. Once he gets to the other side, Nick meets Mary Louise Parker as Proctor, who works for the “Rest In Peace Department,” a Heavenly police force that tracks down the dead

who are evading judgment. Proctor gives Nick the choice of joining up or facing eternal damnation. He agrees, and is promptly paired up with Jeff Bridges as Roy Pulsifer, a lawman from the old west.

Reynolds is at his absolute least charming here, though you'd think that would be enough for any movie. It isn't. It doesn't help that he has virtually no chemistry with Bridges, whose performance might as well have been cobbled together from outtakes from "True Grit." The lack of chemistry is absolutely fatal here, given the lack of imagination that dogs this movie from the first frame. The way the movie's written, it wants to play out as an odd couple cop movie, in the mold of "Lethal Weapon" or even this summer's far more entertaining cop comedy, also shot in Boston, "The Heat."

But the filmmakers are determined to shoehorn it into a supernatural "Men in Black," and it isn't working. For one thing, screenwriters Phil Hay, Matt Manfredi and David Dobkin haven't given Reynolds anything like the quotient of one-liners Will Smith had in "Men in Black." As for Bridges, who given the formula should be channeling Tommy Lee Jones, we're never sure whether or not his character actually does know what he's doing. The script also never makes it clear whether or not the R.I.P.D. actually knows how many rogue dead people are running around down here at any given time.

Elements from other afterlife-themed movies, notably "Ghostbusters," "Beetlejuice" and "Ghost," also rise from beyond their cinematic graves, and spotting them is at least as much fun as anything that's happening on-screen. Another way to while this hour and a half of your life that you aren't getting back is to spot the product placement, which is especially obvious, intrusive and distracting. The bottle of Fresca on Mary Louise Parker's desk is so prominent it actually turns the shot into a two-shot of Parker and the soda. (W.B. Mason, Fresca and Garelick Milk pop up early. You have to find some of your own.)

You have to believe the primary blame is with director Robert Schwentke. Schwentke's "RED" was a far more rollicking, rambunctious affair. By comparison, "R.I.P.D." is simply dull, humorless and plodding. This premise probably could have been livelier, notwithstanding the fact that most of the characters are dead. But this is a zombie of a movie, shambling aimlessly between set pieces, unsure of its tone and trying to find a pulse. What dramatic impact could have been mustered from the theme that the dead have to resign themselves to their new lot in (after)life, and whatever earthly business is unfinished will stay that way, is squandered.

Boston is without doubt one of the most beautiful cities in America, but you'd be hard-pressed to know it from Alwin H. Kuchler's washed out, drab photography. The special effects are by and large impressive, but the movie they serve is such a mirthless and mechanical affair that it seems a little like performing CPR on someone who's already been buried.

"R.I.P.D." is based on a comic book, and you'd have to believe the powers-that-be were thinking franchise. At this point they're probably thinking write-off. "R.I.P.D." is strictly dead on arrival, and a sequel would make Hell start to look good.