

'The Velveteen Rabbit' a touching children's movie

By ROGER MOORE The Orlando Sentinel - Published: February 18, 2009

Family- and low-budget-Christian film specialist Michael Landon Jr. — you-know-who's son — lifts his game considerably in turning Margery Williams' children's classic "The Velveteen Rabbit" into a film. Though it flirts with maudlin here and there, and the animation is hardly state of the art, the director of "The Last Sin Eater" and "Love's Abiding Joy" turns his loose adaptation of that story into a nice children's tear-jerker and a generally winning combination of live action and animation.

In the America of the early 1900s, Toby (Matthew Harbour) is a boy who has lost his mother and whose sad, humorless dad (Kevin Jubinville) has dropped him off with his own icy, society matron mom (Una Kay) to live. Life with his fussy, imperious grandmother in her rural estate doesn't hold the promise of much fun for the kid. But Dad's injunction must be Toby's motto — "No tears."

At least there's an attic to play in, and grandma's permission to play there. That becomes Toby's escape. And when he finds a stuffed bunny, a rocking horse and a wooden goose, the boy slips into the world his dad once knew, a room transformed by his imagination.

All it takes is a tear and the toys are transported into an animated, magical alternate setting where the bunny, the goose (voiced by Oscar winner Ellen Burstyn) and horse (Tom Skerritt, funny) chat and pass along life lessons to the boy. Everything that's real was imagined first," the rabbit (Chandler Wakefield) teaches.

Horse knows the legend of the toys that can become real if their owners believe in them fervently enough. Of course kids outgrow their toys before that belief ever magically transforms their favorite playthings. But a horse can dream. And so can a wooden goose with an eye for the metaphor at the heart of this tale.

"Love is what makes us real."

This holiday-set "Velveteen" isn't a literal translation of the Rabbit tale, but it hits the emotional highlights. Toby gets sick and the toys don't know what to do; love and sacrifice play their part. The film's odd production history — it was filmed a couple of years ago and is only opening in select cities a month before going to video — suggest that it's been edited, and that trying to sell it with only a couple of "names" in the voice cast flummoxed its producers.

That's a shame. This modestly mounted Rabbit is more touching than children's movies typically are today. The live action cast may be unknowns, but they're effective enough; the 2-D (drawn and digital) animation is winning; and the story will engross any 8-and-under with the patience to watch it.

Perhaps Landon & Co. should have taken their own script's advice and put this in more theaters.

"Just throw your heart into it and the rest will follow."