

The 'burbs ★★★★★½

Year of Release: 1989

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: Skip It

Poor Ray Peterson: all he wanted was to spend his vacation quietly at home—relaxing, mowing the lawn, fixing the barbecue, and watching ball games on TV. But then, he met the Klopeks, his new next-door neighbors, in *The 'burbs*, the horror spoof starring Tom Hanks. The Klopeks aren't like us normal folks, and they certainly don't fit into Suburbia, U.S.A. For instance, their house is decrepit, their yard has grown out of control, no one has ever seen them, and strange noises come from their basement late at night. As Ray becomes suspicious of his new "neighbors from Hell," his restful vacation turns into a nightmare of paranoia. He suspects the Klopeks of everything from murder to satanic worship.

The 'burbs, directed by Joe Dante (*Gremlins*), is an attempt to lampoon the horror genre on one hand and the American, suburban lifestyle on the other. *The 'burbs* wants to be a parody a la *Airplane*, but a poor script, uneven direction, and frequent lapses in momentum sabotage the film.

Visually and stylistically, however, the movie is stunning thanks to Dante's imaginative direction. He employs extreme close-ups, melodramatic zooms, and quick-fire editing to great comic effect. And best of all, Dante gives Ray's neighborhood a real sense of space and place. In fact, the most effective part of *The 'burbs* is the first half hour, during which the film introduces us to Ray's suburban neighborhood and its eccentric residents. Hanks is Ray, the only normal person on the block; he's your average suburbanite and family man. Next door lives his slovenly friend, Art, played by Rick Ducommun. Across the street is Bruce Dern as Mr. Rumsfield, a wacko Vietnam vet who still dresses in army fatigues and plays with his war toys. He lives with a dizzy blonde bombshell (Wendy Schaal) who likes to prance around in skimpy, revealing outfits. At the end of the block lives Walter, an old man who's quite attached to his poodle, his perfectly groomed lawn, and his toupee. And let's not forget Corey Feldman as a radical teenager who gets his kicks by watching his neighbors from his porch. Then, of course, there are the Klopeks who are strange even by the standards of this neighborhood. Dante has created a satirical microcosm of America: a block of suburbia that would make the Cleavers run for their lives.

Dante demonstrates once again his knack for

horror; he brings a stylish look and a paranoid atmosphere to the screen. His comedy skills, however, are not so well honed. While the humor in *The 'burbs* is sometimes clever, more often it is mindless, playing to the lowest common denominator.

Some scenes *are* hilarious such as when Ray, Art, and Rumsfield dive into a garbage truck, much to the bewilderment of the garbage men, in order to rummage through the Klopeks' trash. In another amusing scene, the camera zooms wildly in and out and in and out as Art and Ray find a large thigh bone and come to the horrifying realization that it belongs to their missing neighbor, Walter.

Most of the time, however, the gags are either too juvenile, too cheap, or too predictable to produce honest laughs. Most of the jokes are so obvious that you can see them coming from miles away. You don't have to be psychic to predict that when Art climbs up a telephone pole to cut a power line, he's going to nearly electrocute himself and then plummet to the ground. And yet despite these problems, *The 'burbs* hits the satirical mark often enough to keep things rolling; the movie seldom fails to entertain.

With the exception of Dern's outrageous tour de force performance as Rumsfield (which is almost worth the price of admission alone), the acting in *The 'burbs* is uninspired. In fact, after his tremendous success in *Big* and *Punchline*, I'm surprised that Hanks took this role. Ray is one of the least colorful characters Hanks has ever played. The actor doesn't get to do anything interesting with his character until the very end of the film when Ray goes on a rampage; only then do we finally get some vintage Hanks humor. During most of *The 'burbs*, another actor would have sufficed in the role, which is a condemnation not of Hanks but of the movie. I think it's a safe bet that *The 'burbs* will not revive Carrie Fisher's sagging film career. As Ray's bland wife, Carol, Fisher seems to be going through the motions; the actress gives a lifeless performance in a thankless role. At least Schaal and Feldman inject some spirit and humor into their supporting roles.

The 'burbs has its strong points, but it also contains a fatal excess of unnecessary baggage. For every well-earned laugh, there is a groan. But if you have the patience and don't mind suffering through the weaknesses of the film, you just may

want to visit this very unusual neighborhood. But remember, beware of the Klopeks.

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