

Review: 'Two Family House'

Joe Leydon

Film Critic

[@joeleydon](#)

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of over-30 ticketbuyers. Upbeat reviews and favorable word of mouth should increase its cross-generational appeal in the theatrical marketplace, making ancillary prospects all the rosier.

Set in a predominantly Italian-American neighborhood of Staten Island during the mid-1950s, “House” charts the misadventures of Buddy Visalo (Michael Rispoli), a factory worker and would-be entrepreneur whose ambitious self-employment ventures — including an ill-fated pizza delivery business — have an unfortunate tendency to fizzle. Flashbacks reveal that, during his military service, Buddy performed as a singer for his fellow troops. At one performance, he was approvingly noticed by entertainer Arthur Godfrey, and invited to audition back home in the States.

Once he returned to Staten Island, however, Buddy was dissuaded from pursuing a showbiz career by Estelle (Katherine Narducci), his more pragmatic bride-to-be, and her tradition-bound parents.

After a decade or so of living with his in-laws while repeatedly failing at his moneymaking schemes, Buddy makes one last grasp for the brass ring when he decides to purchase a gone-to-seed two-family house. He plans to refurbish the building so that he and Estelle can live upstairs, and convert the downstairs area into a restaurant-bar where he can sing for customers. Estelle reluctantly gives her blessing to the enterprise — but only, as she confides to her friends, so that one more spectacular failure will finally convince Buddy to lower his sights and live a “normal” life.

Buddy doesn’t discover until finalizing the purchase that his house already has two unwanted upstairs tenants: Jim O’Neary (an aptly pugnacious Kevin Conway), a hard-drinking, chronically unemployed Irish immigrant, and Mary (Kelly Macdonald), Jim’s conspicuously younger and pregnant wife. When the couple refuses to vacate the premises, Buddy rounds up a few of his buddies to evict them forcibly. But just before the situation turns ugly, Mary gives birth, and it’s immediately obvious that Jim isn’t the baby’s

father — that, in fact, the infant is the product of Mary's brief affair with an African-American man. Shocked beyond words, Jim wanders off, never to be seen again.

Despite his genuine sympathy for the abandoned young mother, Buddy is too mindful of possible scandal — and too easily swayed by his wife's nagging — to do anything but demand Mary's departure. And yet, for reasons even he doesn't entirely understand, he soon has second thoughts. He arranges for Mary and her baby to live in a rented room elsewhere in the neighborhood, offering to pay the rent until she finds another place to stay, and insisting that she not tell anyone of his beneficence. Naturally, Mary is mistrustful of his charity.

Little of what happens next can be described as surprising. Indeed, De Felitta tips his hand right from the start by having "House" narrated by Mary's grown-up child, clearly suggesting a long-term bond between the young mother and the would-be restaurateur. Even so, pic remains involving and affecting as the initially wary characters warm to each other.

Rispoli gives a thoroughly winning performance as a decent fellow who wants to do right by his wife but who also wants to be true to himself. It's easy to believe that Buddy has heretofore been faithful to Estelle, and that he begins an adulterous affair — which he honestly assumes will be a brief encounter — only because he has found a true soul mate. As the equally needy but perhaps more strong-willed Mary, Macdonald strikes the perfect balance of fragility and strength, resilience and vulnerability. Narducci has to work hard to avoid coming off as the one-dimensional villain of the piece, but she manages to lace her shrewishness with an undercurrent of not-so-quiet desperation.

Period flavor is enhanced by Teresa Mastropierro's evocative production design and a smattering of well-chosen '50s pop tunes on the soundtrack. For all the pic's sentimentality, De Felitta refuses to back away from some unpleasantly realistic touches. Buddy's wife and friends are casually racist in their remarks about Mary's baby, and even Buddy seems — initially, at

least — to be less than enlightened in regard to the child's parentage. The comments ring true in the context of the time and place, but some audiences may be put off. By and large, however, "Two Family House" is a big-hearted crowd-pleaser, and should attract many visitors when Lions Gate rolls out the welcome mat.

Two Family House

Production

A Lions Gate release of a Filbert Steps production. Produced by Anne Harrison, Alan Klingenstein. Executive producers, Jim Kohlberg, Adam Brightman. Directed, written by Raymond De Felitta.

Crew

Camera (color), Michael Mayers; editor, David Leonard; production designer, Teresa Mastropierro; music, Stephen Endelman; music supervisor, Susan Jacobs; costume designer, Liz McGarrity; sound, Antonio Arroyo; associate producer, Bernie DeLeo; casting, Sheila Jaffe, Georgianne Walken, Julia Kim. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (American Spectrum), Jan. 22, 1999. Running time: 107 MIN.

With

Buddy Visalo Michael Rispoli Mary O'Neary Kelly Macdonald Estelle Visalo
Katherine Narducci Jim O'Neary Kevin Conway Chipmunk Matt Servitto Laura
..... Michele Santopietro Donato Louis Guss Marie Rosemary DeAngelis Mr.
Cicco Victor Arnold Mr. Brancaccio Richard B. Shull

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