

THE HAPPYTIME MURDERS (2018)

- August 29th, 2018
- 1 hr 31 mins
- \$40,000,000 (estimated)
- Directed by Brian Henson
- Written by Todd Berger
- Production company: Black Bear Pictures, Henson Alternative, Huayi Brothers Media.
- Rated R for strong crude and sexual content and language throughout, and some drug material

QUICK THOUGHTS

- Marisa Serafini
- Demetri Panos

DEVELOPMENT

- The original script for the film was brought to Henson 14 years earlier by writer Todd Berger but Henson thought it was too dirty and passed.
- A few years later after starting the live, and very R-rated, puppet improv show Puppet Up!, Brian Henson remembered the script and got in touch with Berger thinking it would be a good direction for the company to go in.
- Ben Falcone read the script and was also on board [after Melissa]. McCarthy then did a pass of her own on the script. "The script was so good that my pass was really just clarifying what I wanted to say," she said.
- First announced back in 2008.
- Cameron Diaz was offered the lead role, but she passed and was replaced by Katherine Heigl.
- *The Happytime Murders* continued to linger in development hell for several years, eventually being picked up by STX Entertainment in 2015.
- Jamie Foxx was in negotiations to star at the time, but Melissa McCarthy was officially cast in the main human part in 2017.

WRITING (Todd Berger)

- "We were sitting around back in 2002, and we were like, "Hey, we should write a feature. We should come up with a feature idea. Maybe we'll go make it." And we came up with the story of the characters for *The Happytime Murders*.
- "I had a long conversation with Berger over the phone. We start things off by sharing our mutual admiration for *Meet the Feebles* and work our way to the various other inspirations behind *The Happytime Murders*. We discuss how he determined how far was too far when debasing puppets, and the arduous process of finding a laugh."
- "I guess I never even looked at it as like, we're gonna take something you liked as a kid and totally screw with it. It was just to me more like, we're gonna take one of the many tools in the tool box of telling a story and we're gonna come over here and use it to do this."
- "It's a movie for people who grew up watching the thing we're satirizing".
- "I was a huge fan of the movie *Training Day*. It was one of the only DVDs I actually owned back in 2002. And to me, we were looking to like, let's take a classic Hollywood movie formula and replace one of the two characters with a puppet. And there was no more classic Hollywood formula than a buddy cop movie. And we both grew up in the

'80s loving *Lethal Weapon* and all of these buddy cop movies, where you pair up two guys who don't get along from different sides of the tracks. And we were like, what if we did a buddy cop movie, but it's a human and a puppet and they live in a world where it's humans and puppets cohabiting with each other, and puppets are kind of the more underclass of society? Kind of like *Alien Nation*. Remember *Alien Nation*?"

- "The problem is (puppets) develop an addiction to super high-grade sugar. They become sugar addicts," says director Brian Henson. "But (McCarthy's character) gets high on it too, just like a puppet."
- "When I went to the first test screening of *Happytime Murders*, I thought people were gonna laugh at the puppet sex scene with the silly string jizz, but I didn't realize people were gonna lose their goddamn minds like they did. And then there were other parts of the movie that I thought was really funny and no one really cared."
- Drew Massey was tapped for the office sex scene between Phil and his femme fatale client. His job was to shoot the Silly String, three consecutive bottles per take.
- When I got the call that Melissa McCarthy was on board and wanted to do the movie and it was going into production, I was like, "I'll believe it when I'm on set." Then I went to set, and it was that mixture of, "Wow. Those are the characters that Dee and I created come to life 15 years later and we're on the set of the Sugar Smack den, which is something that we came up with 15 years ago probably while drunk at a bar."

STORY/TOPICS

- Syndication
- Old Past Buddy Cop
- Puppet Discrimination

CAST:

MELISSA MCCARTHY (Detective Connie Edwards)

- Melissa McCarthy read the script and immediately liked it. "By page 2, when I read this – and I'm not exaggerating – Ben was outside and I walked out and was like, 'I think I'm in.'," said McCarthy. "He was like, 'You've been gone 13 seconds. What do you mean?' I was like, 'I know, but there's a big street scene of gritty L.A. and they're playing 'I'm Your Puppet.'" He was like, 'Why don't you go read it?' And then, I came back out on page 4 and was like, 'I'm just saying, I really think I'm already in.' I never say that. I wait until the very end and I think about it, but I had the strangest reaction to it."
- McCarthy says showing cultural commentary in a palatable way is often more effective than preaching. "If you can make your point to make them laugh, I think sometimes people can take it a little better," she said.
- McCarthy's Character Was Originally Written as a Man
- "She came on and, although she didn't really feminize the character or anything, she took the character and just made it her own. Her just riffing and interacting with the puppets, especially Bill Barretta who plays Phil Phillips who is pretty amazing and funny." -Berger

BILL BARRETTA (puppeteer- Phil Phillips)

- Muppets Most Wanted, The Muppets, Tinseltown, Animal Show, The Adventures of Elmo in Grouchland, Muppet Treasure Island

ELIZABETH BANKS (Jenny)

- "We're not just here to entertain we actually want to say something with everything that we do as artists," she said. "And I feel like that was the opportunity here, to talk about marginalized communities and racism and misogyny and just all of it and how we approach marginalized communities generally as a society and historically, there's a lot at work here which is really interesting but we're having fun at the same time."
- Banks describes her character Jenny as "a bit of a femme fatale" and says the film has "a little Dick Tracy in it" too.

MAYA RUDOLPH (Bubbles)

- "Bubbles is devoted and hardworking. She is a human in a human-puppet world, but I think that she feels more comfortable and identifies more on the puppet side. She's disappointed in the human department. She comes with some baggage. She and Phil really seem to have a very wonderful relationship. It's that good old-fashioned secretary-detective relationship, but obviously with a twist, because he's a puppet."
- "The first time I got to work with puppets was on *Sesame Street*, and it's weird how you have this gravitational pull towards the puppet and not the puppeteer."

LESLIE DAVID BAKER (Lt. Banning)

JOEL MCHALE (Agent Campbell)

DORIAN DAVIES (Puppeteer - Sandra)

DIRECTING: (Brian Henson)

- The son of Jim Henson who famously conceived *The Muppet Show* (1976) and the Muppets.
- This is the first theatrical film Brian Henson has directed since *Muppet Treasure Island* (1996).
- "[Working with Brian] It's like a dream, a gift, and a joy. I've never really been in his world before. I feel like I've stepped into something that's so well thought out and has so much history to it. This is a world that he lives in, and it's totally foreign to me."- Rudolph
- Brian Henson's worst day on set was when he had to play the character Crab. He had to be inside a trash can so that he could simultaneously direct as well as operate and voice Crab. While he was in there, he suddenly felt something cold and liquid creeping down his back. As it turned out, a crew member who thought it was a real trash can had carelessly thrown in a half-full bottle of beer.

TRIVIA

- The title chosen for the Italian release is a spoof of Tarantino's "Inglorious Basterds". In Italy, the title was changed to "Pupazzi senza gloria", which translates to "Inglorious Puppets".

PRODUCTION/CINEMATOGRAPHY (Mitchell Amundsen)

- 125 puppets are used in *The Happytime Murders* and 40 of them were crafted specifically for this film.

- In order to film the puppets interacting in the environment with the human actors the floors of the set are elevated and include panels that are removable, so the puppeteers can maneuver underneath to operate the puppets. And yes, puppeteers is plural. It requires multiple puppeteers clad in green to operate each puppet.
- To accommodate the puppeteers, all of the sets are built up, so that they can stand on the floor because their optimum way to operate is if they're standing with straight arms. Because the floor of the sets come up in pieces, the human actors have a two-foot margin to stay on their path and there are all these people in crazy green suits.
- The creature workshop has eight individuals on the team. Four of those people prep the puppets for the next scene and the next day, and build new puppets and reconfigure already existing puppets as other characters, on a daily basis. And then, there are four people on the set, that do the on-set rigging for each shot.
- There are six different Phil puppets, all of which do slightly different things. There was even a Phil made just for an underwater scene, which are challenging because the puppets soak up a lot of water.
- Henson's special effects people set up a tubed system for McCarthy (it's the same Hollywood magic that allows Muppet Kermit to blow out candles, or sip champagne). This particular system sucked up the sugar, allowing McCarthy to make it appear she was inhaling the sugar through a Twizzler directly into her nose. "The tube went up her arm and out of the shot. So you never saw the tube," says Henson. "So when she's sniffing, it is sucking up all of the sugar, but it's a little vacuum cleaner that we have."
- They had built this hydraulic machine so that the puppet could thrust back and forth. Engineers had been called in to help build this machine and they really went for it.
- Leg Crossing: A puppeteer has the puppet in one hand and then another hand in the mouth. Then there's another person being their right hand. That's why even improv is technically difficult for puppets because you've got two hands being controlled by two different people. You don't think about certain puppet actions like crossing your legs takes more than just one person. It takes two or three or four different puppeteers manipulating different parts of the puppet body to do very particular things. It was fascinating to watch. There's a bit over the closing credits where you get to see the craziness of puppeteers dressed in green screen body suits manipulating the puppets in ways you didn't expect.
- Happytime Murders Show: "I liken it to like The Electric Company meets like The Simpsons," explained Banks. "So it was not animated and it was not the Muppet Show. It was more like it was on five days a week, three times a day. And it was just something people loved like Pee Wee's Playhouse."
- Creature Workshop where the puppets get built and repaired, on a daily basis.

EDITING/VFX (Brian Scott Olds)

- CGI has been around for about 18 years but doesn't replace the need for puppeteers. In The Happytime Murders, everything is puppeteered, even if CGI is used.

SOUND/MUSIC (Christopher Lennertz)

- Rupert Gregson-Williams was originally scoring the film

PROMOTION

- SESAME STREET CONTROVERSY:

- The creators of Sesame Street have filed a lawsuit against the distributor of an upcoming Hollywood film *The Happytime Murders* to halt an advertising tagline that it claims falsely associates itself with the children's television show.
- Sesame Workshop alleges in the lawsuit, filed on Thursday in New York state court, that STX Productions has created confusion among the public into believing the film is connected to the show and infringed on the Sesame Street trademark.
- "As evidenced by a parade of social media posts, emails and public comments, the "No Sesame. All Street." tagline has confused and appalled viewers because of what they believe to be a serious breach of trust," the lawsuit alleges.
- STX loved the idea of working closely with Brian Henson and the Jim Henson Company to tell the untold story of the active lives of Henson puppets when they're not performing in front of children," the statement said.
- "While we're disappointed that Sesame Street does not share in the fun, we are confident in our legal position," it added.
- "Sesame has demanded that Defendants simply drop the references to Sesame Street from 'The Happytime Murders' marketing materials – a relatively small burden compared to the devastating and irreparable injury Defendants are causing," reads a complaint filed yesterday by Sesame Workshop. "But Defendants have refused, and the confusion and tarnishment are building, as evidenced in numerous social media postings."

BOX OFFICE

- (As of August 28th, 2018)
- Domestic: \$11,389,229
- Foreign: \$X
- Worldwide: \$X
- Opening Weekend:
 - 9,532,425
 - (##3 rank, 3,256 theaters, \$2,928 average)
 - *The Happytime Murders* opened in 3,256 theaters with a middling per-screen average of just \$3,077. That per-screen average also marks a new career low for McCarthy.

RECEPTION

- Rotten Tomatoes: 22% Tatometer, 50% Audience
- Cinemascore: C-
- IMDb: 5.2/10
- "*The Happytime Murders* barely makes it to 90 minutes. Those are, however, some of the longest minutes you'll endure in the cinema this year. The jokes aren't funny. The puppets are often ugly. The weedy soundtrack sounds like the result of a fat man sitting on a Game Boy in 1992." -Irishtimes
- "Vulgar humor outweighs positives in raunchy puppet movie." - Common Sense Media

SEQUELS

- This Could Be the Beginning of a Puppet Cinematic Universe

- Henson says he and Berger "have been throwing around ideas of intersecting storylines that can happen in this universe." So this might actually be the beginning of a new puppet era.