

***Shaun the Sheep* Is a Silly Kids Movie With More Wisdom Than Most Adult Movies**

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Shaun the Sheep might look like an exciting, no-nonsense tale for little kids — and it totally is, on one level — but beneath its pitch-perfect simplicity lies great wisdom and beauty.



Shaun the Sheep. Photo: Lionsgate

Aardman Animations' *Shaun the Sheep* is both a winning kids' film and a sly artistic manifesto. Much like the the popular BBC animated show (itself a spinoff from Aardman's *Wallace and Gromit* shorts) that inspired it, the stop-motion feature unfolds without any spoken dialogue, primarily using images to tell its zany story — a throwback of sorts to classic silent slapstick. (Keaton and Chaplin are the obvious touchpoints; one may also be reminded of Laurel and Hardy at times.) But the storytelling here is also so delicate that plenty of bigger, more grown-up movies could learn a thing or two from its humanity.

Our story is set in motion when the free-spirited, precocious Shaun, a sort of diminutive dreamer among the pliant sheep of Mossy Bottom Farm, finds himself bored by the routine of daily farm life (expressed here through a rhythmic montage

that shows both Farmer and flock repeatedly going through the unforbearing drudgery of their days). He gets the idea from an ad on the side of a passing bus to take a brief vacation. So, the animals put their beloved dim Farmer to sleep, then wreak havoc around the place (making smoothies, watching Westerns on TV, putting metal forks in the microwave, etc.). But then the sleeping Farmer's trailer goes off its moorings and rolls down a hill towards the Big City (that's what it's called: "the Big City"), and the sheep, as well as their loyal dog Bitzer, have to head to the city themselves to try to retrieve their master.

Unlucky for them, the Farmer lands in the hospital with head injuries and total memory loss. While the animals are pursued in the city by a vain dog-catcher (or, more accurate, an animal containment officer, since he catches anything and everything that doesn't walk on two legs), the Farmer goes off on an adventure of his own, becoming a celebrity barber thanks to the one thing he hasn't forgotten: his motor memory of what to do with an electric shear.

The chaos builds and builds with plenty of sweep, wit, and vigor, as the film's avoidance of dialogue adds to the intensity with which situations spiral out of control. For whatever reason, dialogue in most action setpieces — even appropriately breathless dialogue — tends to have a tamping-down, unwinding effect; when action unfolds without anyone being able to say anything, it compounds the urgency. (For further illustration of this example, also see the *Mad Max* films.)

Another important side effect of a film that's shorn of unnecessary dialogue and plot frills: We pay greater attention to the moments that do matter, however small they may seem. *Shaun the Sheep* finds time to give its characters — even its villain — dashes of shading. Early on, we see the dog-catcher crack a smile upon hearing applause after he captures a stray dog, only to realize that it's a group of bystanders cheering on a young man doing skateboard tricks. It helps us understand the thanklessness of his job, and also sets us up for a later bit where our animal heroes pretend to be a human who has taken a liking to him. Later on, a scene where a group of caged animals prepare for "Adoption Day" — desperately primping themselves in the hopes that a visitor might take them home — has such a cumulative sadness that you're liable to burst. *Shaun the Sheep* might look like an exciting, no-nonsense tale for little kids — and it totally is, on one level — but beneath its pitch-perfect simplicity lies great wisdom and beauty.

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