Get Smart

Talent: Steve Carell, Anne Hathaway, Alan Arkin, Terence Stamp, Dwayne Johnson (The Rock), Ken Davitian, James Caan.

Date of review: Thursday 26th June, 2008
Director: Peter Segal
Classification: PG
Running time: 110 minutes
We rate it: Four and a half stars.

Like many people who mis-spent their youth watching too much television, I can remember a golden age of American TV comedy: it was characterised, for me, by the mid-1960s series created by Mel Brooks and Buck Henry, Get Smart. Born as a sort of comedic reaction to some of the more serious cold-war thrillers like Fail Safe and its Seven Days in May, Get Smart reduced the espionage landscape to an ongoing battle for supremacy between two shadowy spy agencies: the bad guys, K.A.O.S., and the good guys, CONTROL. Headed up by bungling spy-hero Maxwell Smart (who was of course anything but), and his wiser and far more competent “side-kick”, Agent 99, the CONTROL agency routinely foiled plots to explode bombs, assassinate Presidents, and generally destroy the balance of good and evil.

Brooks and Henry created a series that is now legendary for its cheesy but still laugh-out-loud humour, which was given life by a game cast and a series of running gags that are now the stuff of TV folklore. Phrases like “Missed it by THAT much,” and “The old dart-gun in the fountain-pen trick” still have me rolling about laughing whenever they’re delivered, which many of my contemporaries find somewhat sad, I must admit. (It’s a bit like still screaming with laughter at the Pink Panther movies. You either love this kind of stuff, or you don’t.)

With this updating of the Get Smart franchise for the big screen, director Peter Segal has found what is for my money the perfect couple to inhabit the roles of Agents 86 and 99 for the new millennium: Steve Carell and Anne Hathaway. Carell brings his straight-faced goofiness and neat comic timing to the role of Max, and Anne Hathaway brings both convincing athletic prowess and unflappable glamour to the role of Agent 99. The pair suit each other surprisingly well, and while many of the original characters’ idiosyncracies are preserved here, what’s been changed is the somewhat subservient and quietly-spoken attitude Barbara Feldon used to take as 99 in the series. Here Hathaway is a straight-shooting tough-girl, who is as smart and resourceful as she is beautiful, and who won’t take much of Max’s well-intentioned
nonsense. When it becomes clear that ultra-badguy Terence Stamp wants to detonate a nuclear bomb unless he’s paid 100 million dollars, 99 takes the lead and Max is left running to catch up as the pair skip across the globe in order to foil the plot. There’s a little bit of romantic spark between the two, but to say whether or not it’s resolved would be telling too much…

What one can say about Get Smart is that it is, for the most part, as funny as hell, and quite thrilling, to boot. The action scenes are delivered with the big bangs that we’ve come to expect in the cinema these days, and the gags are almost non-stop, as Max blunders his way through situations that range from trying to shoot off handcuffs with a miniature dartgun to dangling from a banner hanging from a speeding airplane while chasing an out-of-control SUV. It’s all remarkably silly and has its tongue firmly in its cheek, but, just like the original series, the humour is pitched at just the right level to keep audiences laughing out loud almost all the way through. Stamp chews the scenery wonderfully as the KAOS villain, Ken Davitian (of Borat fame) is good fun as his off-sider, and Agents 86 and 99 deliver the goods in scene after scene. Those who loved the original won’t be disappointed, and for newcomers, this will likely prove to be one of the funniest films of recent months.

Nick Prescott