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Diamond Dog Caper

A Stouffer Pictures presentation in association with North by Northwest Entertainment. Produced by Mark Stouffer. Co-producers, Wendy Winks, Rich Cowan. Executive producers, Frances Chaney, Steve West, Carolyn West, Mark Litwak, Jay Sedrish. Directed by Mark Stouffer. Screenplay, Stouffer, Dennis S. Johnson.

With: Luke Benward, Brittany Curran, French Stewart, Kevin P. Farley, Kelly Perrine, Cameron Monaghan, Denyse Toontz, Garrett Morris, Kendra Benward, John Farley.

By [LAEL LOEWENSTEIN](#)

A welcome throwback to a simpler, gentler breed of family entertainment, "Diamond Dog Caper" has plenty going for it. An adventure-comedy about a boy who rescues a dog from three crooks and recovers stolen treasure in the process, this "Caper" conjures the insouciant spirit of live-action family films from the '70s. Currently making fest rounds, pic could see theatrical life as a viable albeit slight alternative to the f/x-heavy fare overrunning multiplexes. With a marketing emphasis on its charismatic young stars, it could also play well as a rental.

With his parents away and his distracted older sister (Brittany Curran, TV's "Suite Life of Zack & Cody") nominally in charge, 12-year-old Owen (Luke Benward, "How to Eat Fried Worms") is left to his own devices: He delivers the paper, dodges a school bully (Cameron Monaghan) and spends afternoons in a forest hideaway weaving tall tales and crafting inventions. But his chance encounter with three hoodlums and a mistreated dog changes all that.

Owen bonds instantly with the golden retriever he frees from the cruel hands of three thugs (French Stewart, Kevin Farley, Kelly Perrine). Stumbling on a newspaper account of a diamond heist, Owen realizes the chief suspects are the very miscreants he's just outrun. What's more, he deduces, they've stashed the loot somewhere on the dog, presumably on her sparkling studded collar. (The actual site, disclosed later, is more unsettling -- think "Lassie" meets "Maria Full of Grace" -- but the specifics will be lost on most kids. Marketers would do well to downplay the dog's mishandling, which is not explicit.)

Having renamed the dog Diamond, Owen takes her to the police (Garrett Morris among them), who promptly dismiss his story. With the thugs in hot pursuit, the action culminates in a "Home Alone"-style showdown. Yielding spirited laughs, the broadly comic sequence will delight youngsters not weaned on or yet jaded by the Macaulay Culkin/John Hughes franchise.

Stewart (perhaps not coincidentally, a veteran of TV's "Home Alone 4") makes an appropriately cantankerous villain; ditto Farley and Perrine as his bumbling, flatulent henchmen. As Owen, the appealing Benward confirms that he's a young actor to watch (and aspiring singer, too, contributing a catchy tune to the soundtrack).

Enhancing pic's tone and propelling its story forward at a rapid clip, Andrew Gross' score is exceptionally well integrated and effectively deployed. As for Mark Stouffer's script, what it may lack in originality it easily overcomes through his lively direction and assured hand. An experienced docu helmer, Stouffer also makes deft use of his location; Spokane, Wash., has rarely looked better than in Tom Camarda's lens and Vincent DeFelice's pristine production design.

Camera (color), Tom Camarda; editor, Jeff Martin; music, Andrew Gross; production designer, Vincent DeFelice; art director, Casey Sargent; set decorator, Dan Beyer; costume designer, Lisa Caryl; sound (Dolby Digital) Tom Taylor; visual effects supervisor, Lance Wilhoite; assistant director, Chris Edmonds; casting, Harriet Greenspan. Reviewed on DVD, Los Angeles, Feb. 11, 2008. (In Santa Barbara Film Festival -- Applebox.) Running time: 108 MIN.

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