



Columbia Pictures/The Associated Press

Steve Martin, standing, and Kevin Kline star in "The Pink Panther."

Pink

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le, this assemblage of adolescent pranks and pratfalls is a forgettable piffle.

Martin, who shares screenwriting credit with Len Blum, tries to play Clouseau with earnest, but his performance is all surface shenanigans as he emulates the physical humor of Sellers and silent-era stars Buster Keaton and Charles Chaplin but captures little of their warmth and pathos.

The movie is so simple-minded and unambitious that it never really dredges up comparisons. Other than the outrageous French accent, Henry Mancini's timelessly slinky theme music and the animated opening title credit, this remake bears so little resemblance to the Sellers-Edwards "Panther" series that it's not worth drawing parallels.

"The Pink Panther" is unkind to co-stars Beyoncé Knowles, Emily Mortimer and Jean Reno, whose characters often seem like weird afterthoughts to give Martin's Clouseau someone to bounce off of.

But the movie chews up and spits out Martin's old pal Kevin Kline in the role Herbert Lom originated as Clouseau's endlessly suffering police superior, Chief Inspector Dreyfus.

Kline is either stuck in monotonous soliloquizing about Clouseau's ineptitude or left standing around waiting for his detective to inflict some new torment.

"The Pink Panther" opens at a meandering escargot's pace with Dreyfus' deady dull voice-overs laying out the back-story of imbecile extraordinaire Clouseau, who's tapped to investigate a soccer coach's murder and the disappearance of his gaudy "Pink Panther" diamond ring.

As the coach's girlfriend, Beyoncé is a key person of interest to Clouseau, whose comrades include Mortimer as his awkward secretary and Reno as a variant of sidekick Cato from the Sellers era.

Clouseau blusters and blunders about with equal parts arrogance and stupidity. While Sellers' hijinks were mostly hits with a scattering of misses, Martin's incarnation is the reverse — a lot of dull, repetitive mispronunciation jokes and Clouseau-induced calamities punctuated by the odd clever moment.

It adds up to about a trailer's worth of material, so if you've caught the movie preview, you've seen about all that merits seeing.

That the first "Pink Panther" movie in two decades should be handed to Martin's "Cheaper by the Dozen" director Shawn Levy indicates the studio hoped for the grade-school crowd that loves to

see lots of people fall down instead of the more urbane slapstick fans that Edwards catered to.

"The Pink Panther" may lure in some of the kids and parents of the "Cheaper by the Dozen" crowds, though it's not really a family movie. Levy has made a strange hybrid — a story and characters for grown-ups, gags for

children not yet old enough to appreciate the subtle humor of snapping one another with wet towels — that probably has only limited appeal for both audiences.

On and off the schedule amid Sony's purchase of MGM, "The Pink Panther" has an inside joke or two about James Bond, bits that are dated now that Sony-

MGM has cast Daniel Craig as the new 007.

Should you bother catching the movie, watch for one not-very-serious aspirant to the Bond mantle in a tiny cameo and another more-serious aspirant in a substantive cameo, complete with a wisecrack that would seem inspired had he landed the role.

THE PINK PANTHER

Starring: Steve Martin, Kevin Kline, Beyoncé Knowles, Jean Reno, Emily Mortimer, Henry Czerny

Directed by: Shawn Levy

Running time: 92 minutes

Rated: PG, for occasional, crude and suggestive humor, and language

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