

'Tropic Thunder' rated I for 'insensitivity'

from today
At one time or another, most people have used terms like "idiot," "moron," "buffoon" — even, perhaps, the most insulting of all such terms, "retard" — to describe someone who does or says something we view as stupid.

It's rarely a big deal.

Unless you have an intellectual or developmental disability. Then it's not so funny.

That's why the new movie "Tropic Thunder," a spoof about the making of a film about the Vietnam War, has sparked an uproar among those who represent the intellectually disabled.

In the movie, Ben Stiller plays an action-movie star who had hoped to win an Oscar nomination for his previous film "Simple Jack" — in which he portrayed the title character, visually and vocally, as a grossly unflattering caricature of an intellectually limited adult.

This becomes a running gag throughout "Tropic Thunder," especially in one lengthy scene where a fellow character played by Robert Downey Jr. explains to Stiller that he wasn't nominated because he made the bold move of going "full retard."

The Arc of New Jersey, an organization that creates programs and living arrangements for the disabled, objects to "the feeling of degradation and humiliation the movie fosters," according to Celine Fortin, its associate executive director. "It's time for people to realize it hurts people who are the least able to carry off such an insult," she says. "Some of those we work with have listened to that (the word "retard") their whole lives. To them, it is a big deal. When you go about every day hearing yourself insulted, that hurt never goes away."

I can attest to that. My son, who lives in a group home in Monmouth County, also has



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heard that word a lot. It upsets and frustrates him, just as it does the other developmentally disabled men who live with him. At a movie, while bowling or on a seashore boardwalk, overhearing a passer-by use the R-word ruins an otherwise pleasant event for them. In fact, that becomes the event.

The problem with the movie is that it virtually sanctions casual use of the term for young viewers.

Dreamworks, which produced the movie, insists its R-rating means the audience will be 17 and older, by which age theoretically a person has developed some sensitivity. But in a multiplex world, we all know that tickets purchased to PG movies give kids access to everything, and the truth is that with its often crude humor and slapstick-level satire, this is a movie that has "teenager" written all over it. Dreamworks knows that, too.

My 15-year-old friend Doug Burtha and two of his friends attended the same Sunday evening screening as I. It was his second viewing of the film, and not surprisingly, he loved it.

When I asked about "Simple Jack," Doug, a sophomore at Mendham High, said that was just part of the joke.

"Jack acted stupid, but Ben Stiller — the actor playing him — was supposed to act stupid," he said.

When I suggested someone with an intellectual disability would be hurt by such a portrayal, he said, "Yeah. I didn't think the movie sent a negative message, 'cause it's just a Hollywood movie. But yes, I could see how it would offend

some people."

It's a great deal more than just a Hollywood movie to the Arc and more than 20 other organizations, including the American Association of Persons with Disabilities and Special Olympics. Before the movie was released, they conveyed their concerns to Dreamworks.

"They met with studio heads, who said all the right things but made it clear they weren't going to cut any scenes," says Fortin.

So after the film opened last week, the Arc held "Rally for Respect" protests in Hamilton and Brick townships and in Cape May County "to show the world," explains Fortin, "who they (the disabled) are and why they deserve respect." (Such rallies are being held in other states.)

The real payoff, she hopes, might be down the road. "If a studio ever thought about doing this again, (perhaps) it would include among its advisers a person with an intellectual disability. That would be phenomenal because it would be such a milestone."

Objectors did succeed in getting an offending movie trailer removed along with insulting merchandise bearing the "Never go full retard" line.

Meanwhile, the Arc has developed its own T-shirts for "Rally for Respect" events: One features a circled "R" with a slash through it. Others bear such slogans as "The R-Word Should Be Respect," "Abilities, Not Disabilities" and — my favorite — "Tropical Blunder."

More about the Arc and its programs, including its issues with the film and scheduled rallies, can be found at thearc.org. Comments on the movie "Tropical Thunder" may be e-mailed to comments@dreamworksstudios.com.

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