

# The Virginian-Pilot

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'Mary and Max'

## A TALE FORGED IN INK, MADE WITH CLAY

### Mal's take

This animated story of mismatched pen pals and their 20-year relationship across continents is dark, funny and unique.

By Mal Vincent  
The Virginian-Pilot

Two lonely souls thousands of miles apart are at the center of the roguish, wickedly dark comedy "Mary and Max."

The animated film is part of the Virginia Festival of Jewish Film, which continues through Sunday at Tidewater Community College's Roper Performing Arts Center in downtown Norfolk.

Beginning in Australia in 1976, "Mary and Max" chronicles 20 years of a pen-pal friendship between a neglected, shy 8-year-old Australian girl named Mary Dinkle and an obese, 44-year-old New York City man named Max Horowitz.

They have little in life except each other – and even that relationship is from a distance.

Filmed in stop-motion clay animation, "Mary and Max" is one of the more unusual animated movies in a year marked by impressive efforts.

The film has a dark motif – using brown and gray for Australia and black and white for New York City. A cloud of death hovers over the story, but it is occasionally hilarious, with sight gags that approach those of vaudeville.

Mary's father stuffs dead birds, and her lipstick-smearing mother is fond of liquor and shoplifting. The girl has to make her own toys. Her only friend is her pet rooster, Ethel, a standard cartoon character in a strangely non-cartoonish movie.

Max is a former mental patient who wolfs down chocolate hot dogs and puffs up to 325 pounds. His approach to life keeps him estranged from society in general. His only companion, a fish named Henry VIII, dies in an early scene, and that is followed by the deaths of many



MELODRAMA PICTURES PHOTOS

We first meet Mary, at top, as a shy 8-year-old girl in Australia. Max, above, is an obese, anxious 44-year-old in New York City.

### the festival

Continues Thursday with the Academy Award-winning "Gentleman's Agreement," introduced and hosted by Virginian-Pilot movie critic Mal Vincent with a cast that includes Gregory Peck, Dorothy McGuire, John Garfield and Celeste Holm.

other Henrys.

Max faces severe and almost suicidal anxiety attacks whenever Mary asks him questions about serious subjects like life and love.

The title characters are voiced memorably by Toni Collette and

Philip Seymour Hoffman. Eric Bana supplies the voice of a loser neighbor whom Mary eventually marries.

Made in Australia for adults, the film is OK for more mature children, and no kids who see it will be harmed.

To the contrary, the darkness of this evolving relationship is a life lesson all of us have to experience. Although it is overly long, and repetitive in its final 30 minutes, it is a unique film.

"Mary and Max" maintains that life is like a long sidewalk – smoothly paved at times but filled with cracks.

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★★★

**Cast** The voices of Philip Seymour Hoffman, Toni Collette, Eric Bana, Barry Humphries

**Director and writer** Adam Elliott

**When** 7 tonight

**Where** Tidewater Community College's Roper

Performing Arts Center, 340 Granby St. in Norfolk, as part of the 17th annual Virginia Festival of Jewish Film

**More info** (757) 321-2338