KNOCKED UP

A few hours before I saw the film, a friend asked if I was looking forward to *Knocked Up*, and as a devoted fan of writer/director Judd Apatow, I responded, only half-jokingly, that I was because "Judd Apatow is going to *save* movie comedy." After seeing the movie, I'm not sure there was reason to even *half*-joke: Judd Apatow just might save movie comedy. Over the past 10 years, there are only a handful of TV series that hold a candle to Apatow's *Freaks & Greeks* and *Undeclared*, and his directorial debut *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* is pretty much the current dirty/sweet-comedy standard-bearer; *Knocked Up* suggests that beyond being a sensational entertainer, Apatow may be that rare comic pioneer who is also (gasp!) a comedic artist.

Apatow's series and films have focused on the mystery - and the eventual, mutual acceptance - of the "us" and the "them": the freaks and the geeks (both high-school and college variety) in *Freaks & Geeks* and *Undeclared*, the worldly and the inexperienced in *Virgin.* Yet *Knocked Up* marks the first time the writer/director has focused his attention specifically on the "us" and "them" of men and women, and in doing so, has created something of a cultural milestone. As entertaining as many of today's movie comedies are - *Blades of Glory*, I'm convinced, is a slob classic in the making - none of them demonstrates the generosity of spirit, and the inspiring *fascination*, of Apatow's; he's an "us" who wants to deeply

understand being a "them." And in *Knocked Up*, he's forged the absolute rarest kind of popular comedy: a completely nonjudgmental one.

See the trailer and you'll know the hook: Shlubby slacker Ben (Seth Rogen) sleeps with stunning Alison (Katherine Heigl), the one-night stand leads to pregnancy, and the aforementioned slacker subsequently tries to be a responsible daddy-to-be. Yet what the trailers can't impart in three minutes (or, on TV, in 30 seconds) is how much Ben *wants* to be a responsible daddy-to-be. Though overwhelmed by the news of Alison's expectancy, he's not altogether *unhappy* about it - he genuinely wants to give this dad thing a try. (In one of the movie's sweetest touches, Ben, right from the beginning, seeks parental advice from his perfectly unhelpful father, played by Harold Ramis.) Ben legitimately wants to understand fatherhood, and understand *Alison*, and the film's comedy - and its heartbreak - comes from his completely well-meaning, fundamentally inept attempts to do so.

The movie is obsessively, and hysterically, male-centric, and numerous scenes are devoted to the hijinks of Ben's sense-and-hygiene-deprived roommates, an achingly funny, motley crew composed of Apatow stock players Jay Baruchel, Jonah Hill, Jason Segel, and Martin Starr. But Apatow, fascinated as he appears to be by the opposite sex, is careful to give equal weight to Alison's travails as well; he's one of the few directors of American comedies not interested in using women solely as *props*. (Lurking behind the plot-goosing theme of "Will Ben learn to grow up?" is "Will Alison wait around long enough to find *out*?") Apatow never suggests that Ben's crisis of the spirit is more meaningful than hers, and Alison's frequent (yet not mean-spirited) humiliation as a result of her pregnancy leads to some devastatingly true (yet *still* funny) moments.

And complementing the Ben-and-Alison storyline are the characters of Alison's sister, Debbie (Leslie Mann), and her husband, Pete (Paul Rudd), figures of matrimonial "perfection" - gorgeous house, beautiful kids - whose relationship is rife with insecurity and disappointment ... but only as much as *anyone's* is. Debbie and Pete know they love each other, and they adore their kids, but they remain ever-vigilant for something coming along to *ruin* everything, and are well aware that, in their paranoia, they might be ruining things *themselves*.

Knocked Up
shows astonishingly keen insight into the dynamics of male-female relationships; it's the rare movie that could conceivably end with both men and women leaving the auditorium whispering to themselves, "This movie is about
me
."

None of the film's dare-I-say-it-again artistic success would be possible without supremely empathetic performances across the board, and the offhandedly charismatic, marvelously funny Rogen and the fantastically spirited, unexpectedly moving Heigl are a comic dream pairing. Yet Apatow has also, consistently and generously, elicited detailed work by his works' less-central characters, and in addition to the *Knocked Up* cameos that feel as brilliantly fleshed-out as the film's leads - *The Office*'s Craig Robinson has an unforgettable bit as an intimidatingly honest bouncer, and Alan Tudyk and Kristen Wiig are sleazy perfection as Alsion's employers - the film's supporting characters all feel real, and are unfailingly funny, to boot; Leslie Mann (who is Apatow's wife) gives a portrayal of such richly imagined variety that she nearly emerges as the film's star.

With all of the attention paid to such seemingly passé elements as "character detail" and "honesty," it's almost ridiculous that *Knocked Up* should also be as hilarious as it is, but I can't imagine that more than two minutes pass without a hearty belly laugh. There are more than enough supremely clever lines here to satisfy anyone with even a rudimentary pop-culture awareness (Matthew Fox, James Gandolfini, and Steely Dan might not be so amused), and there's practically no end to the scenes that make you wince while you're roaring; the comedically cringe-inducing scene of Ben and Alison trying, in vain, to resume their sex life many months into the pregnancy yields nearly
cleansing
audience response.

Yet even the movie's most sincere scenes come planted with throwaway jokes that make you laugh out loud ... and get misty-eyed directly thereafter. Wanting him to admit the affair she's sure he's having, Debbie angrily confronts her husband, asking where he *was* the other night. Sheepishly, Pete admits to his wife that he snuck off to see
Spider-Man 3
, and he didn't tell her because he just needed some time alone, and didn't want to hurt her feelings. Momentarily thrown by this confession, Debbie takes a moment to take in the information, and - simultaneously understanding and envious of Pete's need for experiences removed from the family - responds with a teary-eyed, "
I
like Spider-Man... !"

It's nearly impossible to describe what makes that line, in context, so beautiful. But it's tied in to Judd Apatow's remarkable grasp on human idiosyncrasy, and our habit for doing the wrong thing while trying desperately to do the *right* thing, and it underlines why *Knocked Up* - for all of its Summer Blockbuster appeal - is likely to endure as a comedy classic, as much a comment on our times and mores as
Tootsie
or
Some Like It Hot
... or
The 40-Year-Old Virgin
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Although I probably should admit this: I may have that Leslie Mann quote wrong. She might actually say "*love*" instead of "like." I'll see the movie again just to be sure, but here's something I *don't* have wrong: I *love Knocked Up*. For all of its presumed inconsequence, it is - thus far - the movie of the year.

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