



SMART PEOPLE

This past Friday, a couple of friends and I were discussing the long-delayed return of new episodes of NBC's Thursday-night comedies - the unfailingly hysterical *30 Rock* and *The Office*, the shrill, irritating

My Name Is Earl

, and

Scrubs

, a show I've occasionally endured when I was feeling too lazy to change the channel. One of my friends admitted that

Scrubs

has been off its game for quite a while, but said he sticks with it because, after seven seasons, he's become too invested in the actors and their characters to

stop

watching. I felt the same way during director Noam Murro's

Smart People

.

It's not just that the movie - which concerns the gradual personal growth of a dour, sardonic professor (Dennis Quaid) and his dour, sardonic daughter (Ellen Page) - resembles a sitcom. It resembles a sitcom in its waning years, after its writers have run out of inspired storylines and appear content to let the series coast on personality alone. Yet if this sounds like an insult, it isn't meant as one. In just over 90 minutes, Murro, screenwriter Mark Jude Poirier, and a splendid cast create a world so comfortable, unforced, and recognizably human that the even the film's too-convenient plotting and general air of aimlessness don't quell your enjoyment. You may feel as though you've seen *Smart People* before, but as with a TV series that you've grown attached to, familiarity is a large part of the movie's appeal.

For instance, it might be a bit soon after *Juno* for Page to again be playing a precocious (albeit ultra-conservative) teen with a penchant for sarcastic retorts. But you can't argue that the actress delivers her *bon mots* with anything less than spectacular assurance, nor that Thomas Haden Church - portraying Quaid's slacker brother - is reprising his

Sideways

foil with anything less than complete, seemingly effortless conviction. The performers may be

Pall in the Family: "Smart People," "Street Kings," and "Prom Night"

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 16 April 2008 02:08

playing variants on previous roles, yet they're not going through the motions; through fierce intellect and subtle emotional shadings - to say nothing of the witty dialogue in Poirier's tart, funny script - Page and Church find ways to make the recognizable feel brand-new.

Everyone here does, actually. Sarah Jessica Parker plays Quaid's love interest (and, "coincidentally," his former student), yet while we've seen the actress charm her way through nondescript-girlfriend roles before, we've rarely seen her do it with such maturity and simplicity; Parker tones down her sparkling effervescence and gives her warmest screen performance to date. And Quaid pulls off a minor acting miracle, playing an insufferable boor with such pitch-perfect, comedic self-loathing that he's altogether irresistible; Quaid's infrequent smiles are like gifts to the audience. The movie is thoroughly appealing, and even when you think it's getting too sitcom-y, it finds ways to surprise you. (David Denman - Pam's quick-tempered former fiancé on *The Office* - shows up here as a kindly gay neurosurgeon.) If *Smart People* were a sitcom, I'd be happy to stick with it for seven or eight seasons.



STREET KINGS

Director David Ayer's *Street Kings* is a thriller in which a corrupt LAPD cop is shocked - *shocked!* - to discover that his corrupt boss, and his corrupt fellow officers, are just a little more corrupt than he thought they were. This is drama? As the film is based on a James Ellroy story, I'm guessing it was at *one* point. But the film version is such a lurid compendium of crime-fiction clichés and rote, bad-ass exchanges that the results are less gripping than vaguely laughable, especially when Forest Whitaker is spewing vitriol like James Cagney at the *Public Enemy* finale, or when lead Keanu Reeves is saying ... well, *anything*, really. Your enjoyment of the film will probably be dependent on how long it takes for you to giggle at the actor's latest foray into tough-guy posturing; in *Street Kings*

Pall in the Family: "Smart People," "Street Kings," and "Prom Night"

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 16 April 2008 02:08

,
I made it all the way to his introductory line. (And "Konichiwa" to
you
, Mr. Reeves.)



PROM NIGHT

I used to dread horror movies that were rated PG-13, the simple reason being that they were almost assuredly going to be less scary than you wanted them to be. But after several years of increasingly tired torture-porn extravaganzas, I was (kind of) looking forward to the PG-13-rated *Prom Night*, as I was curious to see how a post-Eli Roth Hollywood would remake 1980's fright-fest *without* enough gore to shame an abattoir. I now have my answer. Bring on *Hostel: Part III*!

Director Nelson McCormick gets points for restraint, and promptly loses them for his flick being so unimaginative, shallowly performed, and above all, not in the least bit scary. Try telling that, however, to leading lady Brittany Snow. I understand that her character is twitchy 'cause a psycho killed her family and whatever, but in *Prom Night*, this bubble-headed basket-case shrieks *literally* every time she turns around, whether she's facing the killer, her friends, her aunt, the boyfriend who's been lying in bed with her for hours, or, at one point, a lamp. We're told that the character is on medication to dull the pain of past experiences. It would've been nice if she'd shared.