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FUNNY PEOPLE

Leslie Mann, the wife of comedy kingpin Judd Apatow, is unfailingly awesome, and I love her in her husband's first two outings as a film writer/director: 2005's *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and 2007's *Knocked Up*. So it pains me to say that I would've enjoyed Apatow's third auteurist venture - the current *Funny People* - a whole lot more if Mann's character had been excised from it completely. Of course, that would've made the movie almost a full hour shorter than it is. That would've been all right, too.

At an exhaustingly bloated 145 minutes, the experience of *Funny People* is like watching a profane and hilarious Apatow movie back-to-back with its relatively gutless, far less enjoyable sequel, and it's all the more disappointing for trashing the finest performance Adam Sandler has yet given. Playing a Sandler-esque mega-star whose world begins crumbling after being diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia, the comedian is under no obligation to be likable here, and he's profoundly, exhilaratingly *not* likable; with his lazy-baritone mumble and angry stare, Sandler's George Simmons doesn't bother to hide either his self-loathing or his loathing of everyone around him. He's lost in a haze of depression and resentment, finding only momentary reprieve through crude and cruel jokes made at the expense of others (especially his devoted assistant, Ira, played by a sweet, empathetic Seth Rogen), and Sandler digs so deeply into George's self-involved misery that his

anguish and venom all but burn holes in the screen.

It's a fearless, startling portrayal, and *Funny People* is at its absolute finest when focusing on George, Ira, and the other denizens of the dog-steals-other-dog's-material world of professional stand-up comedy. Jason Schwartzman and Jonah Hill are fantastically entertaining as Ira's endlessly kvetching roommates, bracing pokes are directed toward George's (i.e. Sandler's) cinematic *oeuvre* and the man-children who love it, and there are scores of riotous cameos, including a side-splitting bit in which Eminem threatens to kick the crap out of Ray Romano. But then, just when the movie starts reaching glorious new apexes of inside-baseball comedy, this frank and, at times, even brilliant study of show-biz egomania and neediness dissolves into a puddle of sentimentalized goo.

George and Ira take a trip to northern California to visit Leslie Mann's Girl Who Got Away - now married with kids - and this previously razor-sharp comedy becomes dull in every sense of the term. The pacing goes slack, the humor evaporates, the story becomes an afterthought, and scene after endless scene seems devoted solely to Mann's sad-eyed grin and the exploits of her children - played by Mann's and Apatow's *actual* children, Maude and Iris Apatow. (Which helps explain why, like George, we're forced into watching a lengthy video of Maude singing "Memory" from *Cats*. The girl performs it well enough, but come on ... *seriously* ?)

As even Sandler and Rogen begin flailing in the final reels, the only conceivable downside to ditching this whole misbegotten subplot would be the loss of Eric Bana as Mann's husband, and that actually *would* be a serious loss; the actor is so alert and energized here that you're grateful for his every minute onscreen. (After this and Bana's baddie in *Star Trek,* I'm totally going to have to reevaluate my previously lukewarm feelings about the guy.) Yet even he isn't enough to salvage the dreary, poky mess that *Funny People* morphs into.

By its end, this once-crackling dramatic comedy has degenerated into a glorified and sometimes literal home movie extolling the joys of life and fidelity and stopping to smell the roses, and Apatow's latest, obviously deeply personal endeavor reveals itself to be as overwrought and unbearable as Cameron Crowe's *Elizabethtown*, or most of Francis Ford Coppola's output over the past 30 years. I suppose Apatow's (hopefully momentary) fall had to happen sometime, but

with only two writing/directing efforts previously behind him, I'm just bummed that it had to happen so *soon*.

THE HURT LOCKER

I'll no doubt have more opportunities to discuss Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* in my annual best-of-the-year and Academy Awards coverage, so for the moment, let me just say two things about the film: (1) It's an intense Iraq-war drama about a bomb-defusing Army unit serving in Baghdad, and (2) It's the most unadulterated fun I've had at the cineplex since *The Dark Knight*. If that sounds like the dichotomy to end all dichotomies, so be it. With its first-rate original script by Mark Boal and its heart-stoppingly excellent central performance by Jeremy Renner, Bigelow's work is so beautifully constructed, fiercely intelligent, and feverishly exciting that it makes Hollywood's more high-profile, infinitely more dunderheaded action blockbusters look like a bunch of thumb-sucking mama's boys. It'll no doubt take a few more viewings to be sure (I'm thinking that, eventually, between 15 and 20 should do it), but right now, *The Hurt Locker* - with its ceaselessly involving narrative, emotional generosity, and thrillingly protracted suspense scenes - feels like that rare great movie that manages, astonishingly, to be an even greater time.

G-FORCE

All things considered, Disney's *G-Force* is about as passable an entertainment as any Jerry Bruckheimer-produced tale of super-spy guinea pigs is going to get. It isn't very funny, and the off-putting sincerity of the movie's human actors (especially the usually hysterical Zach Galifianikis and Will Arnett) is slightly embarrassing, and few of the frenetic action scenes are especially memorable, or even visually interesting. (Disneyland and Disney World stage unbelievably spectacular fireworks displays before the parks' nightly closings, so why is the fireworks-fueled show-stopper here such a dismal letdown?) But given the depressingly poor quality of most mid- to late-summer "family" offerings - remember 2008's
Space Chimps
and (ugh)
Star Wars: The Clone Wars
? - I'm just happy to see one that isn't
completely
insulting, and
G-Force
, to its credit, isn't.

Yeah, I'm generally annoyed by frequent product-placement and pop-culture references, too. But there are surprisingly sharp gags here involving one guinea pig's Facebook postings and another's apparent fondness for classic *Saturday Night Live* routines ("Ca-a-a-andy-gram!"), and in an even better surprise, the film's climax - with thousands of household appliances springing to life and forming a skyscraper-sized destructo-appliance - is both ingenious and brilliantly designed. The
best
surprise, however, is delivered by one of its vocal actors. Amongst a refreshingly offbeat cast, Sam Rockwell, Penélope Cruz, Tracy Morgan, and Steve Buscemi offer some fun (though I wish that director Hoyt Heatman had declared a moratorium on the incessant farting of Jon Favreau's tubby rodent), but none of the movie's CGI critters is more vocally expressive or inventive than the gurgling, edgy mole voiced by ...
Nicolas Cage
?!? Speaking in an excitable, high-pitched strangle, Cage is so vocally unrecognizable here, and so uncharacteristically hilarious, that it wasn't until
G-Force
's end credits that I even realized who it was; his work here is a much-needed reminder that when he's not in tiresome Action Stud mode, the actor can be an intensely clever and witty comedian. I have no urge to see
G-Force
again, but I can hardly disregard any movie that evokes memories of Cage in
Raising Arizona
, and does so without also eliciting pangs of regret.