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MEET THE PARENTS

I'm not sure that any movie genre is harder to critique than the Sitcom Disguised as Feature Film. You know the sort: a comedy, usually with faux-dramatic undertones, filled with likable actors playing likable people (even the antagonists are more pesky than dangerous), where the characters' dilemmas are sorted out neatly in under two hours, and with no serious harm coming to any of them in the end. The dialogue is moderately witty, the physical gags are predictable but amusing, the lighting is overly bright, and the score is bouncy, with moments of sap when the characters show their "souls." What's to discuss? You know going in what to expect, and when the film in question is pulled off well, as Jay Roach's *Meet the Parents* is, you leave feeling serene and comfortable.

What some of us don't feel, though, is satisfied. I sat through *Meet the Parents* contented enough, admiring the skillful work of many in the cast, and I even laughed out loud a couple of times. It's completely harmless, and it's diverting enough. It's also rather infuriating, because, like many a sitcom, it goes for easy chuckles when something edgier is obviously called for, it repeats its running gags ad nauseum, and it's so caught up in its nice, safe, unrealistic TV world that you don't believe a minute of it. TV sitcoms are generally a half-hour long with eight minutes of commercials sandwiched within them for a reason; the reassuring sameness of them does more to anesthetize you than excite you, and when stretched to two hours the format falls apart. You might very well like

Meet the Parents

, but you won't feel like you've actually seen a movie.

Ben Stiller plays a male nurse named Greg Focker, and the combination of that profession and that surname immediately tips you off that you've entered sitcom territory. (If you wager a guess on how many jokes are based on Mr. Focker – say it out loud – being a nurse, you've under-guessed by about a hundred.) Greg is deeply in love with Pam Byrnes (Teri Polo) and wants to propose, but is tipped off that he'll only win her hand by passing muster with her dad. Pop is played by Robert De Niro, and it barely matters that Mr. Byrnes (a nod to Monty Burns from *The Simpsons*?) was once an operative for the CIA and has a working lie-detector in his basement – he's De Niro, and a more intimidating father-in-law-to-be is nearly unimaginable.

Meet the Parents

follows Greg's struggles to win over Pam's father and mother (Blythe Danner), which result in a great many mortifying verbal embarrassments, and even more physical ones, as Greg nearly wrecks the Byrnes' home as they host a wedding for their other daughter.

Meet the Parents, as I've indicated, is not without its pleasures, almost all of which stem from the cast. De Niro gives a confident portrayal of an overbearing ogre – it's perhaps his most fully successful comedic performance yet – and he's well-matched with Stiller, bringing to the film his patented neuroses and some delightfully funny slow burns. (He's at his absolute best reacting to two insanely officious airport employees, played to perfection by Amy Hohn and Kali Rocha.) Some of the biggest grins in the film come courtesy of Blythe Danner, who is often caught doing hilarious bits of business when the focus is on others (she's obviously amusing herself, and if you're diligent, she'll amuse the hell out of you, too) and Owen Wilson, whose natural smarminess fits his character like a glove – he plays Pam's rich, blond, ultra-WASPy ex-fiancé – and who gives the film some comedic texture. And while Teri Polo doesn't really have a character to play, she's a warm, inviting, womanly presence, a dream of a fiancée.

About the rest of the film I have very little to say. Director Roach keeps the action clipping along at a traditional sitcom pace – you can practically feel the moments when the laugh track should kick in – and screenwriters Jim Herzfeld and John Hamburg get as much mileage as anyone could out of repeating gags involving the ashes of Mr. Byrnes' departed mother, a family cat that's been trained like a dog, the mistaken assumption that Greg is a pothead, and a toilet that should never, ever be flushed. Not one of these jokes should come as any surprise to you, and judging by the appreciative laughter at the screening I attended, lots of people seem to be just fine with that. You'll get just what you bargain for at *Meet the Parents*. For many, that'll be movie heaven; for some of us, it's just a few stories lower.



GET CARTER

In his ongoing quest to turn somnambulism into an acting style, Sylvester Stallone stars in *Get Carter*

, playing a well-dressed Las Vegas debt collector who investigates the death of his brother, believing that his drunk-driving "accident" was actually a murder. His search leads him to a private world of S&M sex and video porn, and of course, a hidden disk that will reveal many secrets. That's only two sentences worth of

Get Carter

info, and don't you already feel like you've seen this film before?

You probably have, and not just because it's a remake of an obscure British film. But there isn't one element in the plot that hasn't been done to death; director Stephen Kay tries to mask the fact by using a series of jump cuts, overexposed film stock, and other MTV-esque trickery to give the film a grungy, of-the-minute intensity. It doesn't work; it's like watching the opening credits to *Seven* for nearly two hours. Matters aren't helped by the dismal presence of Stallone, whose trademark hung-over quality is not only typically ludicrous but all wrong for the zippy style Kay is aiming for; you could finish a good book, run a few errands, and take a refreshing nap in the pauses before each new Stallone sentence.

It's sad that *Get Carter*, which wants to be nothing more than a brutal revenge fantasy à la the *Death Wish*

franchise, fails on even that abhorrent level, and sadder still that it wastes the talents of three topnotch British performers: Michael Caine, Miranda Richardson, and Alan Cumming (whose climactic scene is so derivative of John Turturro's

Miller's Crossing

breakdown that the Coens should secure a lawyer immediately). But considering how worthless Stallone vehicles have become, and how uninvolved

Get Carter

's story and execution are, I'm guessing that it's nothing to be bothered about for too long

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