

Hollywood, Etc.: Seinfeld is back, and all abuzz about animated feature

by Lee Grant

Hello, Jerry. That greeting can only be for "Bee Movie" king bee Jerry Seinfeld, yada, yada, yada.

BEE REAL - Jerry Seinfeld co-wrote, co-produced and starred in the animated family movie 'Bee Movie.' CNS Photo by Kelvin Jones. Who doesn't like "Seinfeld," the iconic TV sitcom that ran for nine seasons from '89 to '98? "I don't hear that," said the fastidious comedian, settling in for an early morning conversation, already dressed in immaculate jeans and a sport coat, tie and cowboy boots. "I normally get the fans. For them, the show has stood the test of time like an old car that still looks good."

And the fans remind him of favorite episodes like "The Close Talker," "The Bad Breaker-upper," "Man Hands," "Shrinkage," "The Junior Mint," Elaine dancing, "Muffin Tops," "The Soup Nazi," "Double-dipped Chips," "The Low Talker."

Then there are the phrases lingering in the lexicon: "Hello Jerry, Hello Newman," "master of his domain," "we're not gay, not that there's anything wrong with that." And there's nothing wrong with schmoozing about the TV show with the fabulously wealthy comedian (he garnered \$200 million in the deal for syndication rights).

In 2005 at the Las Vegas Comedy Festival, Seinfeld received an achievement award and was introduced by CNN anchor Anderson Cooper as someone "who redefined comedy on television and made so much money he could buy a small African nation."

Seinfeld has been omnipresent pitching his new animated film, the charming and brightly conceived "Bee Movie." The TV show, though, lurks in his mind like a chocolate babka. "I remember every single minute of it," he said. "It was my whole life. I was breathing it. I lived at the show."

Over and over, he's asked how a TV program apparently about nothing ("it's the exact opposite, the show was about something") so captivated people. He responds with an answer borrowed from the late Jackie Gleason on the appeal of "The Honeymooners," another classic sitcom: "It's fun to watch."

Though not in the magical sphere of a "Finding Nemo" or "Ratatouille," "Bee Movie" is fun to watch. A recent preview at Hollywood Boulevard's Grauman's Chinese Theatre drew a panoply of adults and kids, and there were big laughs.

Seinfeld's Barry B. Benson (he wears sneakers, his antennae double as a cell phone) is a honeybee yearning to do something more with his life than be just another worker in the hive. So, he ventures out for his first view of the open-air world with a squadron of buff "pollen jockeys."

Directors Simon J. Smith and Steve Hickner fashion an entire metropolis inside the hive - factory, suburbs, highways, condos - and New York City outside. Barry's foray into the Big Apple of blooming fall colors and Central Park's bountiful gardens is a roller coaster of stomach-in-the-throat dips and turns.

Flying about, he ends up in the apartment of Vanessa, a florist voiced by Rene Zellweger. Right off, he breaks Bee Law No. 1: Don't talk to humans. An inter-species friendship blooms. Humans, he tells her, have plundered the work of bees and profited from honey production. Says one villainous beekeeper, "They make the honey and we make the money." Litigation ensues, bees suing humans for years of exploitation. "When I'm done with the human race," says Barry, "they won't be able to say, 'Honey, I'm home' without paying a royalty."

At the preview, youngsters responded to John Goodman as an enormous, blustery Southern lawyer defending the human species. Adults giggled when a female reporter on the courthouse steps checked out Seinfeld's fuzzy Barry: "Who are you wearing?" It took DreamWorks big shots Jeffrey Katzenberg and Steven Spielberg to convince control freak Seinfeld on an animated project that would be four years in the making and cost the studio in the vicinity of \$100 million.

There have been stupefying offers for another TV project, including a "Seinfeld" reunion. On that, he said, "There's the beauty of being me. They can't buy me." Instead, the lanky 53-year-old performer retreated back to his stand-up roots (the transition is chronicled in the fine documentary "Comedian"). "There was no better experience than 'Seinfeld,'" he said. "I wouldn't want to do something second-rate, which would have been inevitable."

Seinfeld made sure "Bee Movie" wouldn't be second-rate, though it could've used a few less puns (headline in the hive newspaper: "Bees to humans - buzz off"). Besides starring, he co-produced, co-wrote the screenplay and even performed a tune with Matthew Broderick (who plays his bee pal, Adam) over the closing credits.

Seinfeld blessed each frame of the picture's state-of-the-art animation (blasts of color and thrill-ride adventures), a script that doesn't talk down to kids and the casting of Broderick ("a great friend"), Zellweger, longtime buddy Chris Rock, Goodman, Patrick Warburton (a refugee from the TV show) and Oprah Winfrey (voicing the judge).

In the movie, Rock, a superb comic, gets a chance to riff on the difficulty of male mosquitos' attracting female mosquitos who are "trying to trade up." Seems they're more desirous of dragonflies and moths. For it to really rock, "Bee Movie" could've used more of Chris Rock, perhaps exchanging parts with a rather anemic Broderick.

To help him craft the picture, Seinfeld brought in "writing buddies" from the old TV show, including Spike Feresten, author of the famous "Soup Nazi" episode, who now has his own talk show at midnight Saturdays on Fox, and Andy Robin, who wrote "The Junior Mint." "I hadn't written a movie before," said Seinfeld. "I didn't want to do it alone."

These days, Seinfeld doesn't respect much of what he sees on TV (he likes Rock's underrated "Everybody Hates Chris" and former "Seinfeld" co-creator Larry David's caustic "Curb Your Enthusiasm").

"TV is in the doldrums," he said. "I think it's the Internet. People just don't sit in front of the tube anymore. They don't have the patience."

In a relaxed moment, Seinfeld listens to something Carlos Mencia, the pungent contemporary comedian, told a reporter a while back when asked whether his scatological material on race and sex is too much for some people: "I want to make you laugh, and if you live in my world, we'll get through. But if you live in Neverland, you won't get it. Go see Jerry Seinfeld. 'Ever wonder why there's always one missing sock in the dryer?' I don't want these people. Go see somebody else."

"That's good comedy anger," said Seinfeld, his temper in check. Seinfeld was pleased that both kids and adults enjoyed "Bee Movie" at the preview. "With all due respect to Carlos Mencia," he said, "we want all those people."

Long before 'Bee Movie,' B movies created a buzz

By David L. Coddon - CNS

Jerry Seinfeld's animated "Bee Movie" is in theaters now ... so, while we're on the subject of bees, permit me to indulge in an homage to a film genre near and dear to me: the B movie - and, in particular, the B sci-fi movie.

For baby boomers like myself, many of whom were first exposed to the sci-fi B's not in drive-in theaters, but on TV in the '60s, the 1950s were the golden age for at worst cheapie and at best underappreciated second-tier science-fiction cinema. These movies usually starred no-names, "featured" low-budget special effects and lasted under 80 minutes. Their stories were often inspired by the lingering cloud of the Red Scare, or by the looming dangers of atomic power, or both.

A few rose above the level of B's and have become cult classics, since afforded honorary A status: "Invasion of the Body Snatchers," "The Day the Earth Stood Still," "Them!" and "The Thing."

But most will forever be B's, though A's in my book.

The great special-effects creator Ray Harryhausen enjoys A-status in Hollywood, but he's also lovingly associated with some of these B sci-fi's: "The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms," "20 Million Miles to Earth" and my favorite, "Earth vs. the Flying Saucers."

Harryhausen's saucer is the definitive in sci-fi cinema. Neither Spielberg's "Close Encounters" saucers nor those colossal conveyances in "Independence Day" come close. In his 1996 spoof, "Mars Attacks!", Tim Burton paid tribute to Harryhausen, employing UFOs that looked as if they'd been lifted right out of "Earth vs. the Flying Saucers."

So many of the sci-fi B's were embarrassingly bad, with horrendous dialogue and worse acting and monsters that looked like refugees from a Halloween party. But to a kid curled up in front of a TV set on a Saturday afternoon, with the dog nearby for protection and an overstuffed armchair to hide behind if needed, they were frighteningly good fun.

Growing up brought the more tangible, adult fears to the forefront, and I don't need a chair to hide behind anymore when I stumble across one of the B's on cable or late-night television. I watch them and wonder what I saw in some of them in the first place, but I always find something to remind me why I was so entranced.

I never bonded, as so many of my friends did, with the parodic series "Mystery Science Theater 3000," which took some of my beloved B's - like "The Crawling Eye" - and ridiculed them. The "MST3K" guys didn't get it.

The sci-fi B's weren't meant to be serious cinema, or to be taken seriously. They were budget entertainment with a place in Hollywood lore as deserved as all the Lucasfilms and A-list movies.

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