

Movie Review: 'Juno'

by *David_Elliott*

The term "Junoesque" doesn't apply to short, pin-pert Ellen Page in "Juno." But already the name of the Roman goddess is jointly owned by the Canadian, age 20.

'JUNO' - Allison Janney, Ellen Page and J.K. Simmons (from top) star in the comedy 'Juno.' CNS Photo courtesy of Doane Gregory. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) We first see teen Juno losing her virginity to the sounds of Astrud Gilberto, so we guess the movie will be fun. Since her squeeze is Paul (Michael Cera), who is charming like a stressed, hormonal puppy, we wonder if the fun can last. It can, yet with sobering twists. "Juno" is about a girl who gets pregnant and is backed by her shaken but smart, decent parents (Allison Janney and J.K. Simmons are funny without turning sitcom). She likes the boy who proved less his manhood than her new womanhood and determines to face matters her way.

Thanks mainly to Page, a shrimp with oceanic potential, "Juno" delivers more than generic satisfactions. From her fresh mouth, Page delivers lines like a fabled Borscht Belt veteran, zingers that curl scenes toward irony and even (almost) satire - she's almost like Gidget goes Jon Stewart.

Not a loner, not a joiner, just Juno, this is no standard mall chick (she loves the Stooges, Patti Smith and The Runaways). "I don't know what kind of girl I am," she says, and with deadpan snaps as her only real defense, Juno keeps us and those around her guessing, hoping, wondering, laughing.

She's not pious about pregnancy. Of the unborn: "I guess it looks like a sea monkey right now." Prenatally, Juno chooses to give away the baby, and the prospective parents, Mark (Jason Bateman) and Vanessa (Jennifer Garner), seem so very right.

Well, Vanessa does, with Garner's lovably eager yearning. There is something about how suave yupster Mark looks at Juno, the way he plays verbal tag with her, that make us worry. Juno makes him yearn for his lost youth as a musical hopeful, and his zeal to share his fascination in gore-cult filmer Herschell Gordon Lewis is certainly an odd card.

Fast-rising scripiter Diablo Cody, despite that adopted handle suggesting her time as a stripper, deals a string of ace pages to support Page. The director, Jason Reitman, brings the same dry timing and click-snap sureness with actors and dialogue that shaped "Thank You for Smoking."

The script eases away from some gaping traps, notably with Mark. It slyly nudges a feel-good finish. Its warming factor is the rather quick maturing of Paul, so adroitly played as a decent, shy guy by Cera, while Juno works through the emotions behind her patter.

The movie only squishes with its waltz around abortion. The feminist clinic that Juno considers is depicted dismissively, and without becoming a pro-life placard, the film sidles away uneasily from the potential risk toward a family solution.

But "Juno" is pro-Juno, and not pat. Even its comedy casts shadows that make us think. And not since "Election" has a female star talent hit the screen with such a sting of arrival.

A Fox Searchlight Pictures release. Director: Jason Reitman. Writer: Diablo Cody. Cast: Ellen Page, Michael Cera, Allison Janney, Jason Bateman, J.K. Simmons, Jennifer Garner. Running time: 1 hour, 32 minutes. Rated PG-13. 3 1/2 stars.

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