Movie Review: What's so funny about 'Observe and Report'? Nada, but funny you should ask

by Lee Grant

Jody Hill is the directing and writing impresario behind a certain kind of scatological humor. It's a combination of the gross and the profane, of nerd worship and props to those with deep inferiority issues.

RATINGS GUIDE:

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Last year, there was the crude "The Foot Fist Way," starring Danny McBride as the proprietor of a strip mall tae kwon do studio who berates his young students and treats women like slugs.

For HBO, Hill created "Eastbound & Down," with McBride, again, as a former major leaguer who shows up back in his hometown with all the airs of a spoiled child but without the money or the glory. It's down and dirty and often delicious.

Now comes "Observe and Report" with Seth Rogen â€” McBride's in this, too, for an offensive instant as "Caucasian Crackhead" â€” head of security at a depressing Albuquerque, N.M., mall envisioning himself a real cop, a vigilante of sorts, bashing those who dare to create even a nuisance.

His Ronnie Barnhardt has a crush on the blonde who sells cosmetics (wacky Anna Faris, who'll do just about anything in a movie, it seems, however degrading, and always comes away endearing).

Hill's comedy stems from a dark place. What's so funny about a drunken, elderly mother (Celia Weston as Rogen's mom) passed out on the floor of the home they share, soiling herself?

What's so funny about teenage skateboarders gathering on a shopping mall parking lot and getting beaten bloody with their own boards by the security cops?

What's so funny about the fine actor Michael Pena (from "World Trade Center" and "The Lucky Ones") embarrassing himself with a display of lisping Latino stereotype?

And what's so funny about a naked, obese man (played by Randy Gambill, Hill's friend from the North Carolina School of the Arts) running through the mall in full frontal, flashing mode? Amusing, not. Simply sad.

Then, there's Rogen's Special Elite Task Force twins, John and Matt Yuen, two first-time Asian actors who are the butt of jokes like this one, in which they're told, "You're the infantry. One of you gets killed, God gave me another one."

In a startlingly pointless vignette, Rogen's Ronnie has a confrontation with a Middle Eastern shop owner (Aziz Ansari). After insulting him ("Saddam Hussein!"), they stare each other down exchanging multiple variations of the f-word, ad nauseum.

Rogen knows his way around edgy comedy. His raucous pas de deux with James Franco in "Pineapple Express" was not only hilarious but also inspired. He was also excellent in "Knocked Up" and "Superbad." Then again, creative producer-director-writer Judd Apatow was involved in all of them.

And what about Rogen's gelatinous, one-eyed blob in the animated hit "Monsters vs. Aliens"? A monster performance.

In "Observe and Report," he's not well-served by a director who turns him into a violent creep. In this, Seth Rogen is not a likable guy.

Rogen recently showed up on "Saturday Night Live" having "lost a million pounds," he noted. In his monologue, he took questions from the audience who confused "Observe and Report" with "Paul Blart: Mall Cop," the hit Kevin James film. They have parallels (schlubs with crushes on cute women, self-confidence issues, riding modified motorized vehicles).

Both pictures are smug. The difference â€” Ronnie Barnhardt: Mall Cop is a psycho.

"Observe and Report." Rated: R. Running time: 1 hour, 25 minutes. 1.5 stars.

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