Movie Review: 'The Ex'

by David_Elliott

Zach Braff is fine on TV and did a nice job writing, directing and acting in "Garden State." But his meal ticket is boyish cuteness - he's like a teen girls' chat room overhaul of Jon Lovitz.

'THE EX' - Amanda Peet and Jason Bateman star in the romantic comedy 'The Ex.' CNS Photo courtesy of Demmie Todd / Weinstein Co.

Braff smiles and gulps and double-takes cutely in "The Ex" as Tom, an aspiring New York chef. He exits job and city to move with wife Sofia (Amanda Peet) back to her Ohio roots. They've got a new baby, and Tom's a bit of a baby, a good guy prone to well-meant but klutzy gaffes.

It doesn't help that his father-in-law (Charles Grodin) gets Tom a starter job at an ad agency, a place so fiercely hip and feely and PC it's like a Stepford Bosses version of Pee-wee's Playhouse. It helps less that his given "mentor" is an ambition freak and vicious mind-gamer in a wheelchair, Chip (Jason Bateman), a smarmy egotist who once dated Sofia.

With snake-on-wheels Chip, who might (we can easily guess) be faking his "lifelong" paraplegia, Jesse Peretz's movie offers a few risky snaps of anti-PC impudence. But it's also crawly with cartoonish attitudes, dumb twists, embarrassments, baby close-ups, joke violence, a windup kid actor named Lucien Maisel, Grodin echoing past glory as a top comic actor, Mia Farrow as his wife reduced to being a dim, dotty collectible (and not for her real fans).

Chip invoking "The Karate Kid" as inspirational seems cynically apt (after all, he's shameless). But what's with the home-TV clip from Leni Riefenstahl's "Olympia"? Why make so much of cutie Maisel swallowing a hamburger? And why dangle the chance that Sofia may still have a nuzzle urge toward Chip, when any such move would obliterate the small family values core of the movie?

All such questions collapse into: Who cares? This is TV previewed in theaters. It's like watching a sitcom give birth to a tiny, squalling sitcom, without relief by an epidural. We start to crave morphine.

You might also want commercial interruptions, and a cable channel logo in the corner of the screen, even pop-up plugs for the next show. "The Ex" is extravagantly expendable.

RATINGS4 STARS - Excellent.3 STARS - Worthy.2 STARS - Mixed.1 STAR - Poor.0 - Forget It (a dog) An MGM release. Director: Jesse Peretz. Writers: David Guion, Michael Handelman. Cast: Zach Braff, Amanda Peet, Charles Grodin, Jason Bateman, Mia Farrow. Running time: 1 hour, 33 minutes. Rated PG-13. 1 1/2 stars.

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