

Hollywood, Etc.: 'SNL' cohorts take a wild and wacky film detour with 'Hot Rod'

by Lee Grant

"Hot Rod" is a cinematic shot of silliness, a simplistic speck at barely more than 80 minutes. You could do worse - "I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry" or "License to Wed," for instance - than spend a spell with winsome Andy Samberg.

THREE AMIGOS - Jorma Taccone (left), Akiva Schaffer and Andy Samberg have been pals since junior high and work together on 'Saturday Night Live.' They fashioned the show's imaginative digital shorts, including '(Gift) in a Box,' and made the movie 'Hot Rod.' CNS Photo by Nelvin Cepeda. He's the breakout "Saturday Night Live" star who, along with buddies Akiva Schaffer and Jorma Taccone, grew up in Berkeley, Calif., formed the comedic contingent The Lonely Island and ended up together on "SNL."

Their rich rap satires "Lazy Sunday" (inspired by "The Chronicles of Narnia") and "(Gift) in a Box" (in which Samberg and Justin Timberlake perform with a box attached to their, uh, waists) are downloaded staples of the Internet, garnering scores of imitators.

Of all things, "(Gift) in a Box" was nominated this year for an Emmy Award, words from which will not be published here. The category: "Outstanding Original Music and Lyrics."

Recently, the three were in their T-shirts and jeans garb at the San Diego's posh Ivy Hotel. Up the block at the San Diego Convention Center was the fan frenzy that is Comic-Con, at which they appeared on a panel promoting "Hot Rod."

Poolside at the Ivy, Samberg, 28, acknowledged being "a huge fan of comic books and that stuff. I grew up with Spider-Man and Batman and was into Transformers. They were way better than GoBots."

From a literate family (his dad a photographer, his mom an elementary school teacher), Samberg began

reading "The Lord of the Rings" at age 5 and watching films like the futuristic "Blade Runner."

At Willard Junior High, he, Schaffer and Taccone hung out together, making up off-the-wall sketches. Later, at Berkeley High, said Taccone, whose father is artistic director of the prestigious Berkeley Rep, "There was some value in being funny. It's good for not getting beat up."

The friends headed off to college (Samberg and Schaffer to University of California Santa Cruz - Samberg later transferring to New York University - Taccone to University of California at Los Angeles).

Afterward, they regrouped in Berkeley and moved to L.A. together, show business success on their minds.

From a low-end apartment on traffic-engorged Olympic Boulevard, the men established The Lonely Island (named for the complex in which they lived) and began producing Internet videos (check out "The 'Bu," a satire of TV's "The O.C.", and "Awesometown," used as a pitch for a Fox sitcom).

On "SNL," Samberg, sketch director Schaffer, 30, and staff writer Taccone, 29, are the force behind the show's popular digital movies. Recommended download: "Andy Popping Into Frame."

Meanwhile, shooting "Hot Rod" in Vancouver, British Columbia, on a skimpy budget, the men asked for a perk - a high-definition TV to watch international soccer games. Samberg is a fanatic.

The rudimentary plot of "Hot Rod" focuses on an immature, small-town guy named Rod, with a moped and ambitions to be a stuntman. He seeks to follow the path of his dad, who died apparently while toiling as a test rider for Evel Knievel.

He's also dealing with a nasty stepfather (Ian McShane of TV's "Deadwood") and a doting mom (Oscar-winner Sissy Spacek, a long way from "Coal Miner's Daughter").

McShane needs a heart transplant and Samberg wants to get him one by winning \$50,000 for a huge jump over 15 school buses. That way, when his stepdad is better, he can whip him in a fight and gain the respect for which he yearns.

There is slapstick galore as jumps over a public pool, milk trucks and a trailer are bungled. Funny highlight: After one stunt failure, Samberg heads to his "quiet place," chugs booze, smokes, and dances like Kevin Bacon in "Footloose," complete with cartwheels. Then comes a fall down a mountain that lasts, seemingly, forever.

Isla Fisher (from "Wedding Crashers") is an island of sanity in a farcical storm, cute and coolheaded. At one point, Samberg receives mouth-to-mouth resuscitation from her and, awakening, wonders to his nerdy stepbrother (Taccone), "Did it look a little like we were making out?"

Not everything works, particularly an extended "cool beans" routine with Taccone that reeks of an inside joke. They brought it outside, unfortunately.

Samberg does naivete well. Like his screen persona, he's gregarious and likable, recalling that as a kid, "I was always trying to make people (including two older sisters) laugh. My family's silly. My dad's sarcastic. My mom is carefree, easy-going. There was a playful vibe in the house, weird and annoying on purpose."

At the Ivy, Samberg was chatting about "the crew" of pals in the movie. "They all care about each other," he said. "They all truly believe in Rod. They have nothing better to do than be dedicated to each other."

Then there's the link that binds Samberg, Schaffer and Taccone. "Working together, we have great shorthand," said Samberg. "We can say, 'No, it's all wrong!' No ego attached."

Added Taccone, "The three of us are best buds, best friends." When Samberg joined the "SNL" cast, Taccone and Schaffer followed as writers and directors. "We couldn't let just one of the guys go," said Schaffer. "This relationship was sacred."

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