

DVD Select: Beauty, the beast and an insightful story about family

by Robert_J_Hawkins

"That's the thing," says director Judd Apatow, trying to explain the appeal of his movies, in particular "Knocked Up" (Universal, 4 stars). "It can go emotional, make you feel something, maybe even have tears - and get in a joke about doing crack. In literally the same line.

"If you can do that, you're in good shape."

'KNOCKED UP' - Katherine Heigl and Seth Rogen are soon-to-be parents shopping for baby gear in the touching comedy 'Knocked Up.' CNS Photo courtesy of Suzanne Hanover. DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin Yeah, Apatow's in good shape.

He did it on "Freaks and Geeks." He pulled it off in the "40-Year-Old Virgin." He certainly did it in "Knocked Up." And more recently as producer of the surprise summer hit "Superbad."

The man's got an uncanny knack for floating an unfathomably bad concept and then creating an endearingly repulsive comedy.

Look at "Knocked Up." No, I mean really: Spend the darn money and look at "Knocked Up."

The concept? A hopelessly dumpy, juvenile and classless teddy bear named Ben Stone (Seth Rogen) lucks into a one-night stand with a gorgeous TV correspondent (well, she works for E! - not really a correspondent) named Alison (the gorgeous Katherine Heigl).

As luck, or rather Ben's social ineptness, would have it, Alison gets pregnant.

Alison decides to keep the baby while Ben decides to go smoke a few more joints with his socially dwarfed roommates while he tries to decide if growing up is really his next big step.

Funny? Well, no, not the way I summarize it. But Apatow, he has a gift. He makes this whole situation both pathetic and hilarious, sweet and sour, dramatic and juvenile - and as he says, "in literally the same line."

That quote, by the way, comes from the hefty extras on the two-DVD "special edition" of the film. And that's the version you need to go for - the unrated special edition.

It contains stuff that is way more funny than the movie.

The best is a lengthy feature called "Finding Ben Stone." Apatow narrates the fruitless and searingly funny (and completely fictional) search for a lead actor to play Ben. He tries young Michael Cera (from "Arrested Development") who erupts in plumes of volcanic ego. He tries Orlando Bloom, who refuses to lose the accent. James Franco still harbors resentments from his days on the short-lived but beloved "Freaks & Geeks." David Krumholtz is absurdly aggressive toward Hegel. Justin Long insists on indeed creed in commercial romantic comedy.

The choices get increasingly bad (including Apatow casting himself in the role).

Rogen, needless to say, is the perfect choice for Ben. And really Apatow's first and only.

For Apatow fans, the extras are an incredible gold mine. The director's video diaries are bone-dry funny. The outtakes and deleted scenes and extended takes are priceless - especially those of physician/comic Ken Jeong as delivery-room doctor Kuni. There is lengthy raw footage of Rogen and Heigl shooting two key restaurant scenes which really show how the flawless timing develops over time, say take 15 or 20.

In another mockumentary, actor David Krumholtz talks about his brief stint as the "sixth roommate" in "Knocked Up" until he bolts from the movie to take the lead in a Woody Allen film in Europe. Krumholtz laments wrecking the movie. Apatow insists, perhaps a touch too acidly, that it is a far better film without Krumholtz. (The Woody Allen project never gets off the ground.)

There's also Heigl's audition tape, a remarkable performance.

The publicity says there are at least three hours of extras. It flew by in what felt like minutes - laughter makes time fly like that.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Next" (Paramount, 2 1/2 stars) Smalltime Las Vegas magician Cris Johnson (Nicolas Cage in his third cool movie of 2007! "Ghost Rider" and "Grindhouse/Planet Terror") has a special gift. OK. Call it curse. He can see two minutes into the future. The FBI (Julianne Moore as the lead agent) needs his gift to track down nuke-laden terrorists on U.S. soil. The terrorists want to take him down, so he won't foil their plot. Cris just wants to meet the girl (Jessica Biel) of his dreams (whom he saw more than two minutes into the future). The bad guys get to her first and now he must stop them and save her while saving the world. Life is complicated. A real action-thriller but as always with Cage, leavened with wit. Based on a Philip K. Dick story.

"The TV Set" (Fox, 2 1/2 stars) Can we all agree that commercial television is inherently mediocre by design? Well, you will after seeing this Jake Kasdan satire of the biz. Writer Mike Klein (David Duchovny) has a great TV script and studio boss Lenny (Sigourney Weaver) wants it aired on the network. Done. Ha! Not so fast. Mike and his script must first pass through 13 studio production circles of creative hell. Clearly this is payback (Kasdan's baby was the ill-treated cult fave "Freaks and Geeks"). Go ahead and collect.

"Black Book" (Sony, 3 1/2 stars) A boat filled with Jews fleeing occupied Holland is ambushed by the Nazis during World War II and only Rachel Stein (Carice van Houten) survives. She joins the resistance movement and infiltrates the headquarters of Capt. Ludwig Muntze (Sebastian Koch). The captain uncovers her secret (among other things) but does not betray her. However, there is a rat in the resistance ... fast-paced passion and intrigue from the director Paul Verhoeven will keep you on the edge until the end.

Worth taking a risk: "Ten Canoes" (Palm Pictures) Australian aboriginal actor David Gulpilil helps tell the tale of two brothers on a hunt, the younger of whom covets one of his brother's wives. Insightful, entertaining and transporting.

Legends become you: "Last of the Breed" (A&E), 90 minutes. It's the tour I never heard of - Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard and Ray Price at the Chicago Rosemont Theatre. I would have paid double the ticket price to

be in on this one. DVD also includes interviews with the country legends and a personal tour of his bus by Willie himself. Cool.

Mill Creek Entertainment releases its second wave of indie films this week, two documentaries a comedy and a mockumentary. The documentaries are the Arctic tundra turn "Being Caribou," and "Bombay Calling," about the surprisingly robust night life in India. The romantic comedy "My Bad Dad" and the pseudo-documentary on a homegrown visionary "My American Messiah."

IT CAME FROM TV

"Inside the Actors Studio: Leading Men" (Shout!/Bravo, 3 DVDs) Sure James Lipton can be a touch pompous but he has to be to get so much good stuff out of Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, Sean Penn and Russell Crowe. Fresh introductions from Lipton and "great moments that didn't make the cut." Tremendously entertaining.

Season one, volume 2 for two TV crime classics - "The Untouchables" (1960) and "The Streets of San Francisco" (1972-73) debut this week. And more: Season 2 of Comedy Central's adult 'toon "Drawn Together" and BET's academic-eight reality show "College Hill: Virginia State University."

Third season of the brainiac sleuther "Numb3rs" and season two of the covert ops guys in "The Unit."

TV mega-box of the week: "George Carlin: All My Stuff" (MPI, 1977-2005, 14 discs) Carlin is probably as surprised as anybody that he is still around - and still pumping out those laceratingly funny observations on life, religion, the environment, politics and big business. He's been at it 50 years, don't argue. This box holds Carlin's unprecedented 12 HBO comedy specials plus two extensive interviews.

TV mega-box No. 2: "The Sherlock Holmes Collection" (MPI, 1984-95, 14 discs) Jeremy Brett had an exceptional run as the legendry sleuth in this Granada Television series, performing in nearly 100 tales about Holmes. Only a bad heart stopped him in 1995. Besides 43 hours of serious case cracking, the box set includes interviews, audio commentaries and a 44-page booklet.

HBO goes uptown with Kenneth Branagh's take on the Bard's "As You Like It" - and we do - with a cast that includes Kevin Kline, Alfred Molina, Janet McTeer, Adrian Lester, Bryce Dallas Howard and Brian Blessed.

FROM THE VAULTS

"The Last Cigarette" (New Yorker, documentary, 1999) Nicotine Hell is walking into a Denny's outside Pittsburgh late at night and finding all tables but one are filled with huffing-and-puffing chain-smokers - like I did a week ago. Directors Frank Keraudren and Kevin Rafferty ("The Atomic Cafe") would appreciate that scene. Their film explores the culture, madness and politics of the weed with crazy clips and wit. Still relevant.

"Babel" (Paramount) is still a bit fresh to be a "vault" film but this two-disc, second debut for the Golden Globe drama winner includes a 90-minute documentary that shows how the 11-month, four-continent, multi-language shoot became director Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu's personal "Apocalypse."

"The Roger Corman Collection" (Buena Vista) Two great B-movies from the King of the Cheapies: "The Intruder" (1962) in which William Shatner is an itinerant Southern racist fomenting hate from town to town and "Eat My Dust" (1976) which stars young Ron Howard who must steal a race car to get a date with the high school hottie.

"The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid" (Universal, 1972) Young scene-chewing Robert Duvall plays Jesse James (and you are invited to compare him to Brad Pitt's take in the upcoming "The Assassination of Jesse

James by the Coward Robert Ford") and Cliff Robertson is Cole Younger, joining forces for a famously bungled robbery. Philip Kaufman ("The Right Stuff") directed.

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