

Not so much fun for Dick and Jane

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Fun with Dick and Jane, directed by Dean Parisot, screenplay by Judd Apatow and Nicholas Stoller

Fun with Dick and Jane directed by Dean Parisot is a remake of the 1977 comedy of the same title with Jane Fonda and George Segal. Set in 2000, Parisot's film stars Jim Carrey as Dick Harper who heads an upwardly mobile family living their dream life in suburban Los Angeles.

That they are living it heavily mortgaged and in debt does not bother Dick or his wife Jane, (Téa Leoni), as Dick is on the corporate fast track. He works for the behemoth Globodyne, a worldwide leader in the consolidation of media properties, run by the legendary mogul Jack McCallister (Alec Baldwin). When McCallister summons Dick to the executive suite, the latter knows his long-time ambition of becoming a vice president is about to be realized.

With his promotion secured, Dick tells Jane to quit her job in order to spend more time with their son who is closer to the Hispanic housekeeper than he is to his parents (they speak to him in English, he responds in Spanish). Six hours into his new position, Dick as VP of communications appears on a CNN-like financial news program only to be confronted by his host as well as consumer advocate Ralph Nader (playing himself) about executive malfeasance in the collapse of Globodyne. At this point, televised graphics show the company stock entering free-fall even as a stuttering, sweating Dick continues to deliver his embarrassing pro-company spiel. Dick has obviously been set up by McCallister and his CFO, Frank Bascom (Richard Jenkins), to be the patsy in a last-ditch effort to conceal Globodyne's losses from its stock market manipulating shell game.

Having looted whatever assets ever existed in the now worthless company, McCallister leaves with hundreds of millions while his employees face a financial meltdown. In a television news clip, George W. Bush proclaims America to be a wealthy society—an accurate statement as far as the corporate criminals and thieves are concerned.

At first confident that his skills are marketable, Dick soon discovers his job quests leave him standing in line behind hundreds of equally qualified and unemployed executives. The economic plight is widespread; both Dick and Jane are forced to take whatever is available—Dick greeting customers at a giant discount (and cheap labor) mart and Jane doing a humiliating stint as a quasi-Tae Bo instructor.

The Harpers' downward spiral is fast and unrelenting: the electricity gets shut off, the furniture repossessed, the BMW traded in for a beater, the lawn and bushes reclaimed as status-conscious friends vanish and the family is reduced to obtaining food from a soup kitchen. Sinking even lower, Jane signs up to be a research guinea pig for a Botox-like product and Dick stands on street corners with undocumented Mexican workers seeking day labor. Without identification, he gets hauled in with his compadres by the INS. Dick

and Jane's nightmare is comically rendered by the filmmakers, for the most part successfully.

Shamelessly standing in front of his mega-mansion, Jack McCallister gives interviews to the media, explaining that he too has suffered because of Globodyne's failure. Every broadcast of McCallister's smug face and infuriating lies emboldens the Harpers, who finally resort to small-time robberies with escalating imagination and bravado. They are as much trying to recapture their former lifestyle as rebelling against it. Hooking up with former CFO Bascom, now a full-time drunk, the trio plans an audacious caper to rectify McCallister's criminal injustices.

The movie's closing credits thank Enron, Tyco, and WorldCom.

The production notes for *Fun with Dick and Jane* acknowledges corporate criminality as a "resonant theme in the film that was ripe for comic treatment." It quotes from the October 17, 2004 cover story of the *Los Angeles Times Magazine* entitled, "The New Executive Class," in which it describes how corporate pay has increased to astronomical levels while workers' wages have stagnated. "If ordinary workers' annual pay had risen at the same rate as CEO pay since 1990, a report by the Institute for Policy Studies points out, they would be making \$75,338 today—instead of the \$26,899 they are taking home. Adjusted for inflation, that's only marginally more than what they made in 1980," states the article.

The filmmakers point out that starting in the 1980s, "mutual funds and institutional investors came into control of large chunks of company stocks and they wanted quick returns. They applied pressure to the corporate boards, who responded by seeking quick fixes from outside talent. These 'saviors' were lured by higher and higher compensation as well as the promise of a 'golden parachute' should their methods fail."

Dick and Jane are victims of this corporate greed. Says Parisot: "The 'little guys' are the ones who are left with nothing while the upper ranks remain unscathed. Ultimately, it becomes Dick and Jane's job to stand up for those who have gotten the short end of the deal."

Actor Alec Baldwin speaks forcefully in the production notes about the modus operandi of corporate types, such as Jack McCallister: "There is something fascinating about a guy who is paid a guaranteed salary of a couple of million dollars—or in his mind, a couple of lousy million—who has an expense account that is so lavish he doesn't ever spend any of his own money. He also gets an extraordinary stock option package. And then, on top of that, he decides it's necessary to steal an extra couple of hundred million from the company. They have this artificially inflated lifestyle and it seems all perspective is lost. When I saw that Dennis Kozlowski (former CEO of Tyco International) had a \$6,000 umbrella stand, I knew we were going back to Roman times. It was just so vulgar."

Fun With Dick and Jane is not a subtle work. Much of the comedy

succeeds, but not all. There are rough edges and moments of exaggerated comic effort that do not come off. Nonetheless, it is honestly done and possesses a good deal of heart. Taking a look at the 1977 version, with George Segal and Jane Fonda, highlights some of the current film's strengths and sensibilities. Carrey and Leoni work well together (which is not small feat considering how overwhelming Carrey tends to be), although their performances never reach the depth and subtlety Segal and particularly Fonda bring to their roles.

Notable is the different look and feel of the films, each respectively reflective of its times. The 1977 film is darker (much of it seems to take place at night), more cynical, yet more knowing and intimate, while Parisot's film is bright and cold, exuding a sense that around every corner lurks catastrophe, despite all the conspicuous wealth. It is obvious in the earlier film that there still exists a social safety net, albeit a limited one, to deal with the impact of a recession. Whereas in 2000, American society is much more indifferent and brutal, with an almost complete absence of social services.

Although in a meager amount, Segal as Dick Harper is able to collect unemployment, which he supplements by working under the table as an awkward extra in the opera *Carmen*. He and Fonda (as Jane) are able to get money (they are outraged that the interest is 18.5 percent, a typical credit card rate today!) from a loan shark company that advertises: "When it comes to lending money, we are pussycats." Their financial needs are far smaller. Jane's parents also come into the picture, although unhelpfully. After some distasteful moralizing, her wealthy, self-satisfied father refuses her a loan, saying: "You tell Dick he's a lucky man—not every man gets a chance to be tested. I envy him."

Fast forward to the year 2000. Dick and Jane Harper have far fewer options. Their isolation is far greater from family and institutions. No government assistance, no equity from a property whose value plummeted with the demise of a major employer. Even middle class parents could hardly scrounge up the resources to substantively help with a bankruptcy on the scale of Dick and Jane's. There is essentially nothing to stop, or even slow, the plunge into destitution—even for a couple who has, according to the filmmakers, "played by the rules and assembled all the things that define a successful American family."

Further, Segal's character in the earlier film is an aerospace engineer, a man with a genuine, productive skill who, despite his sterling performance, gets downsized. On the other hand, Parisot's protagonist is a pitchman for a global consolidator of media properties, a wheeling-and-dealing, parasitical enterprise, that subtracts from rather than adds to society's wealth.

Whereas Carrey and Leoni's characters are fully vested in the world of competitively "upgrading" luxury items, Segal and Fonda's Dick and Jane are more at home as radicals and 'outlaws.' The latter couple's social descent is therefore much less traumatic—perhaps in part it's even welcomed—than that of their counterparts in the updated film.

This explains something about the easy symbiosis between Carrey's Harper and the Mexican immigrants. When Dick becomes a day laborer, he melds with the other workers and not simply because of what Carrey—with a personal history of having endured hard times—brings to the table. It does not seem out of place or condescending that he and Jane should involve themselves in helping the deported workers get back into the country. Currently, there is an unprecedented leveling of society under way—an extreme polarization in which there is a tiny super-wealthy elite and then, more or less, everyone else. Significant layers of the middle class who have been

dumped like so much garbage by corporate America have overnight become proletarianized.

Segal and Fonda's Harpers face a more temporary kind of financial crisis and therefore are naturally more aristocratic in relationship to the Hispanic characters, who are cast primarily as comedic color. At one point, Segal's character says: "I'm not cut out for blue collar crime. I've got a white collar mentality—I panic in the face of death." Another time, he complains: "In these bicentennial years, I am not going to contribute to the destruction of the middle class."

The class and racial gulf is more a static feature of the 1977 film, although amusingly done. In one scene the Harpers quickly leave a bar they intended to rob when they see it has an all-black clientele. The bartender sarcastically asks: "When did they start busing white robbers into a black neighborhood?"

The Harpers of 1977 get hurt by a corporate boss, Charlie Blanchard (Ed McMahon), who is a crook with a slush fund. The company, Taft Aerospace, faces difficulties because of the winding down of the space program. Blanchard is forced out and presumably the company diversifies. Problem solved. The film ends with Dick replacing Blanchard as the president of the corporation. A cheeky postscript claims that Taft's board praised Harper for displaying "the imagination and ingenuity that has made American industry what it is today."

The situation in 2000 (the latter film's setting) is far more problematic. The Enron-era corruption is vaster in its reach and repercussions. Enron executives created the California energy shortage that bankrupted the state and acutely distressed the most vulnerable sections of the population. Enron's demise involved not just the loss of jobs, as bad as that was, but the wiping out of pensions and life savings for thousands. It revealed, as well as those bankruptcies that followed, that what was at issue was not one bad apple but a system rotten to the core.

As opposed to the 1977 film, significantly Dick and Jack in the new version concern themselves with all those shafted by McCallister and Globodyne, although their solution is hardly radical (or convincing). This reflects a very different outlook than that which was espoused by those movers and shakers, who, at the onset of the Reagan years, would come to be known as the Me-generation.

Director Parisot reiterates this in the movie's production notes: "[T]hey [Dick and Jane] realize that the best way to get back what they've lost is to avenge all the other people Dick worked with who also lost everything they had while their boss got off scot-free, kept his millions and maintained his lavish lifestyle."

Parisot and the cast and crew of *Fun with Dick and Jane* felt a need to weigh in against the political and corporate offensive being conducted against the population. For this, they should be commended.



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