

Juno: an “apolitical” film about teen pregnancy

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4 February 2008

Juno, the new film from director Jason Reitman, has been lavished with praise and awards. Two weeks ago, it received Academy Award nominations in several categories: best picture, best director, best actress and best original screenplay. And like most of the movies nominated for best picture this year, it is not very good.

Juno is a comedy about teen pregnancy and adoption, but not a social satire, properly speaking. It is no *Miracle at Morgan's Creek* (Preston Sturges, 1944). While there are countless jokes in the film, none of them shed much light on the subject matter. Instead, Reitman and screenwriter Diablo Cody inject crack after crack into their story almost at random. The humor is largely imposed on the events, not drawn from exploring the real-life contradictions and relations that such events might generate. It would have been second nature to a Sturges or a Jacques Tati to uncover the absurd or ridiculous possibilities of the situation itself.

“I actually see the movie as completely apolitical,” Reitman told *CanMag.com* in a recent interview. This stance, in itself a political position, also says a great deal about the film. One gets the impression the director has made a point of not stepping on anyone's toes. He has, consequently, produced a toothless and evasive work that doesn't challenge anyone or anything.

The story begins with 16-year-old Juno MacGuff (Ellen Page) staring at the chair in which she and her friend Paulie Bleeker (Michael Cera) have had their first sexual experience together. Having discovered—or accepted—that she is pregnant after her third home pregnancy test in a single day, Juno decides to have her baby and put it up for adoption.

The filmmakers quickly dispatch Juno's initial plans to have an abortion. The clinic she visits disgusts her;

it's more reminiscent of the average Department of Motor Vehicles office than a caring medical facility. A lone protester outside the building—a fellow classmate of Juno's—disturbs her further.

On the abortion issue, the filmmakers take the easy way out. They rush through the matter as though it were an obligation that has to be overcome before they get on with the real business of their film. While it would perhaps be unfair to say that *Juno* is “pro-life,” it certainly renders abortion an unthinkable course of action for the intelligent girl at the center of the story. The ludicrous arguments of her classmate-protester sway her with remarkable ease.

With abortion no longer an option, Juno must tell her parents about her condition and prepare for the coming adoption. Her parents are strangely unshaken by their daughter's announcement. “I didn't know he had it in him” is her father's response to learning that the shy and unassuming Paulie Bleeker is the father. That Juno's parents—or any parents for that matter—might respond to such a situation with sensitivity and support one might be willing to accept, but these parents respond with considerable amusement, taking things almost effortlessly in stride. The response feels false, arranged to make the film “contrarian” and unexpected in an empty fashion (see Reitman's previous effort, *Thank You for Smoking*).

In the back pages of a *PennySaver*, Juno finds the perfect couple to adopt her baby. Mark (Jason Bateman) and Vanessa Loring (Jennifer Garner) are wealthy suburbanite professionals, people quite different from Juno and her own working class family. They are more than eager to enter into an arrangement with Juno in spite of the teenager's brash and even patronizing behavior.

It should come as no surprise that this picture-perfect

husband and wife will soon reveal themselves to be anything *but* perfect. Juno's presence will awaken in Mark a desire to reconnect with his youth and his rock-n-roll past and to escape the stuffy atmosphere of his bourgeois life. This puts his marriage to the prim and proper Vanessa in jeopardy as well as the adoption itself.

Bateman's performance turns out to be one of the few highlights of the film. While his character is certainly not a new creation, the actor is somehow able to draw a compelling and understated performance out of the well-worn material. His character is one of the few recognizable human beings in the work.

In contrast, perhaps the film's greatest flaw is the character of Juno herself; she may in fact be the film's least genuine element. She is quirky, like so many characters we've seen in this sort of comedy. We know this because she frequently has an unlit pipe stuck in her mouth, listens to The Stooges and has a telephone shaped and painted like a hamburger. Juno refuses to give a straight answer to any question put to her. Instead, every line out of her mouth is a joke, a quip or, worse, a zinger. "Being pregnant makes me pee like Seabiscuit," she says at one point. In the same scene she points out the difference between Presidents Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt: "Franklin was the hot one with polio." This all becomes tedious rather quickly.

Ultimately, Juno is not a real living and breathing human being so much as she is a contrivance, a mouthpiece for screenwriter Diablo Cody's one-liners. It's disconcerting, but not in an interesting way, to hear the screenwriter's adult (or quasi-adult) humor and vocabulary emerge from 16-year-old Juno. The teenager can be heard to say in on scene, "I'm telling you I'm pregnant and you're shockingly cavalier." The words simply do not fit in her mouth.

Canadian-born Ellen Page has received numerous accolades for her performance as Juno, and there's no denying her talent. She first gained notoriety when she appeared in *Hard Candy* (2005), a film about a teenage girl—an avenging angel of sorts—who tortures and terrorizes a pedophile she suspects was involved in the murder of a young girl. Essentially a right-wing vigilante picture of the most wrong-headed variety, Page, at least, was able to contribute a disturbing and memorable performance.

Juno, however, her performance fails to move the viewer. This is principally a problem of the material. It's doubtful that any actor could have made much of it. A great deal of Page's screen time is spent debating music and movies with Bateman's character: what was the best period for rock-n-roll music?, was Dario Argento the greatest director of horror movies?, etc. It doesn't amount to much at all.

As the film draws to a close, with the outcome of the adoption now uncertain thanks to the challenges facing the Lorings, the film grows increasingly sentimental. "I just need to know," Juno will say to her father, having been changed by her recent experiences, "if it's possible for two people to stay happy together forever." She will go on to tell Bleeker how her baby only kicks when he's around.

This is the basic trajectory of the film. Juno is tough and quick-witted, confident to a fault, but inside she is soft, sentimental, even scared. A banal revelation, to be sure, but all the filmmakers have to offer. For all its "offbeat" posturing, Juno is ultimately a very conventional movie. There is no reason why it shouldn't do very well for itself at this year's Academy Awards.



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