

Funny People: Requiem for a paperweight

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Written and directed by Judd Apatow

Funny People, producer-director Judd Apatow's bid for recognition as a serious filmmaker, serves instead as the first major theatrical failure since his string of hits began in 2004. While it fails to provide the pathos or life lessons Apatow intended, his new approach is more honest and revealing about his creative methods.

George Simmons (Adam Sandler), a stand-up comedian famous for a series of highly successful brain-dead comedies (which seem to be modeled on those of Rob Schneider and Sandler himself), is given abrupt notice by his doctor that he has a rare form of leukemia untreatable by conventional methods. He starts on an experimental medication regimen, but is not expected to live more than a year.

George revisits the clubs where he launched his career, and at one of them gives a disastrously morbid performance. Ira Wright (Seth Rogen), the struggling young comic scheduled to go on after George, milks laughs from the audience by making fun of George's set. This catches George's attention, and soon Ira is hired to write new stand-up material for him. George also uses Ira to help him accomplish other things he wants to do before he dies, such as "feel good by giving something away [to charity]." Ira also serves as George's last friend—years of self-absorption have severed every meaningful relationship he ever had.

Under pressure from Ira, George begins to open up about his illness to others, including his ex-fiancée Laura (Apatow's wife, Leslie Mann). In an abrupt third-act turn, George's medication successfully eliminates his disease, and he begins lapsing into his old self-absorbed nature. The film then shifts from being primarily a story of Ira's mentorship, and follows George on his quest to win Laura away from her husband of 12 years (Eric Bana). By this point, most audience members have lost interest and tend to agree

with Eminem's statement in a cameo scene that George "just should have died."

Apatow has claimed that he wanted to make a movie about his formative years in stand-up comedy, but "nothing interesting ever happened because everyone was just nice." [1] Apparently, the story of a positive role model nurturing a newcomer's career was dramatically uninteresting. Thus, we have a story where not only is the mentor a deeply unpleasant person (who only gets more unpleasant when he drives the story), but success comes only through betrayal or self-degradation.

George initially offers the assistant position to Ira and Ira's roommate Leo (Jonah Hill), but Ira doesn't even tell Leo. Their other roommate Mark stars on a moronic sitcom described as a "hip-hop 'Head of the Class.'" Both Mark and the comedian who eventually replaces Ira as George's assistant (Aziz Ansari) achieve success through posturing and catchphrases rather than actual humor. None of the fictional comedians seen in the film aspire to more than mediocrity. Leo even makes a deliberately pointless YouTube video as a way of garnering publicity.

All in all, stand-up comedy is portrayed as a bleak and unrewarding world. While recent documentaries such as *Comedian* and *The Aristocrats* portray comedy as a field where strong material is necessary to get ahead and comedians support each other, the world of *Funny People* is uniformly cutthroat and debased. The documentaries ring much truer here.

As publicity for the film, web sites were created showing clips of the characters' work. Revealingly, in most of Simmons's movies, the characters spontaneously learn life lessons and declare themselves to be better people, in the manner of 1980s' and 90s' comedies. Apatow rightly rejects the inauthentic "growth" in these films, but the stance he adopts is to reject growth altogether. What he has created,

ultimately, is a portrait of a self-absorbed entertainer who seems to resemble Sandler less and Apatow more as the movie nears its end.

[1]

<http://www.comingsoon.net/news/interviewsnews.php?id=54255>



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