

# The Invention of Lying: Telling the truth, or some of it

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*Written and directed by Ricky Gervais and Matthew Robinson*

The *Invention of Lying* is the debut of British comedian Ricky Gervais as a writer and director of films. Gervais is probably best known as the creator and star of the television shows “The Office” and “Extras,” two interesting comedies that have shown Gervais to be a perceptive critic of various forms of social convention.

*The Invention of Lying* is set in a world in which human beings never evolved the ability to lie. Not only can they not lie, they feel themselves compelled to share their thoughts and feelings with often brutal honesty. They must reveal themselves; the filters of social convention simply do not exist.

Considered the least successful screenwriter at Lecture Films, Mark Bellison (Gervais) is a self-described “chubby little loser.” He’s at the bottom rung of society, picked on, humiliated, and about to be fired from his job at any moment. On a date with Anna McDoodles (Jennifer Garner), a well-to-do “executive,” who only agreed to go as a favor to a friend, he is ultimately rejected as a suitable partner because Anna doesn’t want her future children to carry Mark’s “snub-nosed” genetic material.

Rejected by Anna, out of a job, and in danger of being evicted from his apartment, something changes within him. Some as yet untapped region of his brain suddenly fires and he gains the ability to lie. From here, the film follows Mark as he tries to turn his life around with lies and win the affection of Anna.

There are amusing moments in the first half of the film. Even advertisements must tell the truth. On the side of a city bus, one sees this ad: “Pepsi: When they don’t have Coke.” Businesses don’t bother with clever or attractive names, but get right to the point, as with

the inn called “A Cheap Motel For Intercourse With A New Stranger.”

One is also pleased to see that Mark is not reduced to completely immoral behavior. Even with the ability to lie, a kind of superpower in this world, he can not always bring himself to use it. He is basically decent.

But the gag of characters speaking openly and honestly about everything and the possibilities presented to the newly born liar begin to wear thin before long, and one wonders where the story could possibly go.

In a dramatic turn, Mark must race to his mother’s hospital bed where she lays dying. To comfort her, he fabricates a story about an afterlife in which she will be eternally happy and reunite with everyone she ever loved. It’s a moving scene, sincerely performed by Gervais. The nurses and doctors tending to Mark’s mother also hear his story of an afterlife and believe it. Word begins to spread and soon an enormous crowd, including members of the news media, gathers outside Mark’s home. He has inadvertently created a religion in which he is the prophet.

Among the most successful bits in the film comes when Mark must concoct the rules of his religion—it takes one night—and present them to the crowd outside his home in what proves to be the ultimate parody of the Ten Commandments scene from the biblical epic by Cecil B. DeMille.

Questions from people in the crowd immediately reveal flaws in Mark’s story, and he must scramble to patch them up, digging himself deeper and deeper into a hole in the process. When he explains to the crowd that the “Man In The Sky” also causes death, someone shouts, “Kill the Man In The Sky!” Mark reassures the crowd and promises that everyone gets their own mansion in heaven. He spontaneously invents Hell and

a criterion for sin in the space of two hours on his front stoop. It's a genuinely funny sequence, and one is impressed by the rather bold skewering of religion here and throughout the remainder of the film. Gervais is an outspoken atheist and refuses to back away from that in his work.

But while this middle section of the film is strong, and funny and surprising moments are to be found throughout the work, it is difficult not to be disappointed in the overall conventional direction in which the work leads. The familiar formula of the Romantic Comedy is followed all too closely, and the romance at the heart of the film is never as interesting or convincing as the rest. Anyone who has ever seen a romantic comedy will not be surprised to learn that Mark has to break up a wedding of his beloved Anna to another man near the film's conclusion. One can see it coming well in advance.

These steps toward convention and cliché are all the more disappointing because the premise of the film offers up many more interesting possibilities than those pursued. One recalls several smaller moments that are never built upon. A businesswoman standing outside her office, completely demoralized, sadly confesses to Mark in one brief moment, "I just don't want to go in there today." What else might the film have addressed?

The Anna character is also curiously unappealing. She's completely shallow, prejudiced and dismissive of anyone she feels is beneath her. It's difficult to see how the sensitive and basically decent Mark character falls so in love with her.

*The Invention of Lying* is uneven and never quite fulfills its promise or potential, but it has more on its mind and contains funnier moments than almost any other comedy in recent memory, and one finds a far more oppositional streak running through it as well.

Ricky Gervais has revealed himself to be an interesting comic. He has had success as a stand-up and as the host of his own radio show and podcast. His best work, however, has been in television. Gervais specializes in a kind of social awkwardness comedy, using body language and facial expressions to great affect. Among his biggest influences are the silent film comedy duo Laurel and Hardy. Like them, Gervais seems to work best in a partnership, be it writing and directing with longtime collaborator Stephen Merchant, or acting alongside the talented Ashley Jensen in

"Extras."

Gervais's first major success came in television with "The Office," a comedy about the workers in a paper company and their manager David Brent who was portrayed by Gervais himself. Of the Brent character, Gervais said in an "Inside the Actor's Studio" interview, "He's middle everything: he's middle aged, middle England, middle management. He's just middle."

Gervais had the good sense not to make Brent into a complete joke. Brent is a human being, and even as he unwittingly makes a fool of himself, the camera of Gervais and co-director Merchant never looks down on him. Gervais's best comedy tends to be critical while avoiding cruelty, not something one can always say about his stand-up or radio work. One can feel Gervais at times treating David Brent with real concern and compassion. The most memorable moment in "The Office" is a dramatic exchange in which Brent futilely asks his superior not to make him redundant.

Gervais and Merchant followed "The Office" with "Extras," a show about an extra working on film sets who works his way up to become the successful star of a sitcom only to discover the moral and artistic compromises he made in order to achieve that success have nearly ruined him.

With *The Invention of Lying*, Gervais has not lost the sensitivity or the elements of social criticism in his earlier work, but they often get buried under the least interesting and most conventional aspects of the film. Still, the more promising moments of the work make one curious to see where Gervais will go from here. He is currently at work on his next movie, *Cemetery Junction*, a comedy-drama about a working class family in 1970s Reading, co-written and directed with Merchant.



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