

The Kids Are All Right: Circling the wagons

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Directed by Lisa Cholodenko; written by Cholodenko and Stuart Blumberg

American filmmaker Lisa Cholodenko's new film *The Kids Are All Right* is a comedy-drama that has received much acclaim on the independent film and film festival circuits. Its appeal is attributable to a number of factors. Cholodenko (*High Art*, 1998, and *Laurel Canyon*, 2003) has assembled a likable cast and her movie proceeds with a degree of intelligence, sensitivity and wit.

The Kids Are All Right involves the gay marriage of Nic (Annette Bening) and Jules (Julianne Moore). In an upscale Los Angeles suburb, they are raising a pair of teenagers who become curious about their anonymous sperm-donor father. College-bound Joni (Mia Wasikowska) and her younger brother Laser (Josh Hutcherson)—one conceived by Nic, the other by Jules—share the same sperm donation. “The moms,” as they are collectively referred to, have hit a rocky patch in their relationship, which may account in part for Joni and Laser's paternal quest.

Nic, a physician, is the breadwinner. She is controlling and frustrated, which causes her to keep her wine glass filled. Jules, the stay-at-home wife and mother, has decided to start a landscape design business. After a 20-year relationship, their sex life has become stale, and even their favorite videos don't seem to help.

Joni's phone call to the sperm bank results in her contacting Paul (Mark Ruffalo), a bearded, laid-back owner of a trendy organic restaurant, who becomes intrigued with the idea of having offspring. His advances towards the family, promoted by Joni and Laser, are resisted at first by their mothers (“We're not doing a time-share on our kids during Joni's last summer at home”).

Nonetheless, Joni and Laser form a bond with Paul. He also begins filling certain emotional and sexual

needs for Jules: “I keep seeing the expressions of my kids in your face,” she tells him. Even Nic warms to him. The outcome of it all, however, is painful and messy.

The Kids Are All Right is initially easy, loose and entertaining. It seems a bit of a send-up of southern California, self-involved, middle-class living. Nic and Jules have at their command all the appropriate liberal, feel-good phrases and mannerisms.

The film is genial in its appraisals, as for example when Jules attempts to explain to Paul the business she is trying to start: “Landscape design.... But not like a gardener! I mean, yes, there is a gardening component to it, but the real work is creating unique, eco-friendly outdoor spaces that harmonize with the surrounding environment.” She later suggests for his backyard, “a trellisy, hidden garden kind of thing,” or “you could go with the Asiany.” The anxiety of the two women that Laser might be gay is also amusing, and believable.

Bening and Moore are funny and comfortable as partners. Wasikowska's Joni is supple and emotionally complex, and Hutcherson's Laser is a treat. Ruffalo does a credible job despite being required, in the end, to be the fall guy for the movie's failings.

The film takes a turn for the worse once Paul is introduced into the tight-knit family. This is first hinted at in Nic's inquisition of Paul (“Did you always know you wanted to be in the food-services industry?”), which is snobbish and unpleasant, particularly when she discovers he is a college drop-out. He was originally chosen as a donor because he advertised himself as studying international relations.

This element persists. Although Jules is the softer character, her treatment and firing of a Mexican gardener is nasty and even seems bizarre. The danger of an alien invasion into this all-so tolerant universe takes hold of the film, which suddenly descends into humorless moralizing. Paul is deemed an “interloper”

to be excluded from this hermetically sealed world. As Cholodenko says in an interview, “He doesn’t belong there... ‘you’re a sperm donor, you are not a dad.’” But, in fact, Paul was the one sought out, both by the children and, ultimately, by Jules, and introduced to the family, not the other way around.

What begins as a friendly and semi-critical view of its characters turns into a narcissistic defense of their weaknesses. Nic’s dominating tendencies are made a virtue; Jules’ sweetness and goofiness are turned into liabilities; and Joni and Laser’s openness is despoiled. The movie’s vengefulness seems bound up with identity politics, despite the filmmaker’s claim that it is non-political.

While Cholodenko is sensitive towards the family members, she is not so sensitive toward anyone else. The filmmaker and her admirers think she is on the social cutting edge by portraying a gay marriage, when in reality her overall outlook (and theirs) is conformist and conservative.

Nic becomes a sentry at the door, spitting out, “No entrance.” What is being kept out? The film presents an idyllic picture of privileged Los Angeles, but that city has more poor people than any other in America. In the end, there is a frightened bewilderment here towards any intrusion and any intruders. Says the director, “He [Paul] has to go chase the impossible, the unavailable, the worst possible choice.” Why should Nic and Jules’ family be so unavailable to Paul?

The Kids Are All Right had the opportunity to go in a different direction, to open up to the world. It starts with heated, comical sex scenes, then hardens into a moralizing glower. It starts by poking fun at California middle class eccentricities, then circles the wagons in their defense. What is Cholodenko trying to say?

It is a bow to the right wing and its “family values,” and the way the director goes about it is significant. Her belligerent protection of the middle class from all kinds of threatening realities has a broader resonance.



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