Jonathan Demme's *Ricki and the Flash* and *American Ultra*: Tired or clueless filmmaking

Joanne Laurier
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Ricki and the Flash, *directed by Jonathan Demme, screenplay by Diablo Cody*; American Ultra, *directed by Nima Nourizadeh, screenplay by Max Landis*

Ricki and the Flash

Veteran filmmaker Jonathan Demme's film, *Ricki and the Flash*, is primarily a vehicle for Meryl Streep, who plays a rock and roll singer and guitarist. With long, dark tresses, make-up and hardware galore, Streep is the scaffolding on which a schematic and thread-bare plot hangs.

Ricki Rendazzo (Streep) and her band have a regular gig at a roadhouse bar in San Fernando Valley, California, whose small, late middle-aged clientele are Ricki's loyal fans. Her lead guitarist and lover, Greg, is played by real-life rock star Rick Springfield (best known for "Jessie's Girl," 1981).

Demme, who directed the classic Talking Heads concert film *Stop Making Sense* (1984) along with three concert films with Neil Young and other music-related works, records the performances live, enlisting the considerable—and considerably wasted—talents of Parliament Funkadelic's Bernie Worrell on keyboards, the late Rick Rosas on bass and Joe Vitale, the original touring drummer for Crosby, Stills & Nash, to play the members of the Flash. The film's energy such as it is finds expression almost exclusively in the group's performances.

Despite the fact that Ricki supplements her income working as a cashier at a Whole Foods-like supermarket, she lives in miserable circumstances and is declaring bankruptcy. Having lost a brother in the Vietnam war, she has a large American flag tattooed on her back, voted for George W. Bush twice as a "support-our-troops" patriot and is disdainful of Barack Obama—an (self-consciously) unusual pedigree for an independent-minded, California hipster.

Furthermore, we discover, Ricki was once a middle class housewife and mother of three. Her real name is Linda Brummell and she abandoned her businessman husband Pete (played like a cardboard cut-out by Kevin Kline), her daughter Julie (Mamie Gummer—Streep's real daughter) and two sons, Josh (Sebastian Stan) and Adam (Nick Westrate), decades ago in pursuit of a career as a musician.

Having had little contact with Ricki/Linda over the years, Pete now inexplicably summons her to come to Indianapolis to deal with a family crisis—Julie is having a serious meltdown due to the break-up of her marriage.

Ricki arrives in her conspicuous attire and accoutrements. The fact that a long-time absentee parent might not be what the doctor ordered is brushed aside with platitudes such as "at times, a girl needs her mother."

Conveniently, Pete's second wife, the saintly, efficient Maureen (Audra McDonald) is away tending to her father. Needless to say, things do not go smoothly at first (Julie: "Do you have a gig tonight, or do you always dress like a hooker from 'Night Court?'").

Ricki's sons are not any more receptive ("Oh my god, she's parenting. Somebody bring a camera."). Their mother is curiously unaware that Josh is getting married and Adam is gay. In short, conventionality is the operative word here and the movie plods along like a wind-up toy.

Demme, born in 1944, has been making feature films and documentaries for 40 years. He first made a name for himself with the modest, amusing *Melvin and Howard* (1980), about the individual who claimed to be billionaire Howard Hughes' heir; *Swing Shift* (1984), centered on a woman working in aircraft plant during World War II; and *Something Wild* (1986), the story of a respectable middle class man who falls for a dangerously libidinous young woman.

Demme got interesting, sometimes eccentric performances from Chloris Leachman, Paul Le Mat, Goldie Hawn, Kurt Russell, Fred Ward, Ed Harris, Christine Lahti, Jeff Daniels, Melanie Griffith, Ray Liotta, Michelle Pfeiffer, Alec Baldwin, Joan Cusack and others in his early films, which exhibited a liveliness and rebelliousness intentionally at odds with the prevailing pro-corporate, Reaganite climate. His greatest success came with *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Philadelphia* (1993), a moving treatment of the AIDS crisis, which were larger-budget works.

Over the past fifteen years, Demme has made only a handful of feature films, including a remake of *The Manchurian*

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Candidate (2004), *Rachel Getting Married* (2008), both of which had their limited virtues, and a version of Henrik Ibsen's *A Master Builder* (2013). He has also made documentary films about Haiti, post-Katrina New Orleans and, tellingly, former President Jimmy Carter.

Demme is known for his opposition to Israeli oppression of the Palestinians, his support for Occupy Wall Street (about which he made a short film) and his collection of "outsider" art. He is clearly an intriguing and sensitive filmmaker. But his brand of Democratic Party left-liberalism has proven an inadequate guide to the social and global explosions of the recent period.

The WSWS commented in 2004: "His [Demme's] humane social concerns—civil rights, the AIDS crisis (*Philadelphia*), women's rights, the conditions of the Haitian people (*The Agronomist*, 2003)—have not always found happy or convincing artistic expression."

In a 2014 interview with the *Daily Beast*, Demme noted that the six years between making *Rachel Getting Married* and *Ricki and the Flash* "was the longest gap between feature films in my career," and referred to some of the problems he faces, despite his history in the industry, raising the financing for a film:

"It's hard to get financing for the kinds of story-driven, character-driven pictures that I'd like to make. I had some very frustrating experiences over the course of that time getting involved with producers I didn't know, and working with wonderful writers on scripts that were marvelous and gathering together a terrific cast, only to discover that the way these projects were going to get financed—because they were non-studio films—was to take the package to the foreign investment world, and whatever advances come in from future foreign sales, that's your budget. That means you can fall *way* short of what I would have thought would be the minimal amount of money needed on the projects at hand."

No doubt this process has been dispiriting. But that does not entirely explain the flabby and unconvincing character of the new film. Is it too much of a speculation to suggest that Demme, a supporter of Barack Obama in 2008, is somewhat discouraged by the present situation? *Ricki and the Flash* is stale, slapdash filmmaking—with the inevitable incorporation of identity politics—and largely a placeholder. Where is the angry film about drone strikes, "kill lists" or social inequality in America?

American Ultra

Iranian-British filmmaker Nima Nourizadeh has directed *American Ultra*, which, as the movie's production notes suggest, is an "action/comedy" inspired by "a real-life CIA attempt to create super warriors that lasted three decades."

The notes go on: "The formerly covert program, known as MK Ultra, was launched in the 1950s in an effort to turn ordinary citizens into superhero-level operatives. Using psychotropic drugs to enhance psychological conditioning, better known as torture, government scientists treated the human brain like a computer and attempted to radically reprogram their subjects to be the most effective and dangerous assets possible."

That the filmmakers have some consciousness of the criminal role of the CIA makes the movie, that is neither funny nor well made, a shameful project from the start.

Mike (Jesse Eisenberg) and Phoebe (Kristen Stewart) work at minimum wage jobs in the small town of Liman, West Virginia. In their spare time, they get stoned and Mike draws cartoons about his creation, "Apollo Ape," a monkey astronaut.

Unbeknownst to Mike, he is actually a CIA sleeper agent. His former handler (Connie Britton) activates him because she knows that an agency supervisor, Adrian Yates (Topher Grace), wants to terminate him. Mike discovers his super powers at the same time as he learns that Phoebe is really his current handler.

Wikipedia has a more expansive entry concerning Project MKUltra, which began in the early 1950s and was *officially* halted in 1973. It is described as an "illegal program of experiments on human subjects … intended to identify and develop drugs and procedures to be used in interrogations and torture, in order to weaken the individual to force confessions through mind control."

Given that Project MKUltra has been replaced with or supplemented by a program of CIA torture and murder on a global scale, it is hard to imagine that any thinking person could find comedic elements in such a vile program. There is apparently no end to Hollywood's willful cynicism and ignorance.

Stewart says in the production notes: "These two kids turn into something you would never foresee. Watching us annihilate a town or take out deadly killers is just funny, especially with Mike's off-the-wall commentary as it goes down. I haven't had this much fun making a movie in years."

Leaving aside the film industry's general obtuseness, the making of *American Ultra* becomes somewhat less incomprehensible when one discovers that director Nima Nourizadeh is the son of Alireza Nourizadeh, one of the former Shah of Iran's inner circle and the editor of Iran's largest-selling newspaper under the CIA-backed torture regime overthrown in 1979!

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