

James L. Brooks' *How Do You Know* inspires a question in return: Why this film?

By Ramon Valle
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Written and directed by James L. Brooks

Despite its numerous big-name performers and media buildup, with only \$7.6 million at the box office during its opening weekend, *How Do You Know*—written and directed by James L. Brooks—has not apparently appealed to the public. This is understandable.

The title, without a question mark, refers to how one knows *when* one is in love.

The film's problems begins with its plot, a banal love triangle involving a softball player (Reese Witherspoon), a major league baseball pitcher (Owen Wilson), and a corporate executive (Mark Rudd). Everyone involved, it is safe to report, is witty enough, clean-scrubbed enough, attractive enough, rich enough, and, most certainly, upper-middle-class enough.

The spectator knows he or she is in for one hour and 56 minutes of mostly tedium when Witherspoon's Lisa Jorgenson and the character played by Rudd, George Madison, are introduced on a blind date and immediately feel uncomfortable with one another, if not downright miserable.

Lisa has been dropped from the national softball team after reaching a certain age, and George is under scrutiny from the Department of Justice for financial shenanigans. Their painful awkwardness notwithstanding (or precisely because of it), in a cliché that Hollywood never seems to tire of, we know that these two are destined for each other—sort of ... until another handsome guy comes into the picture and sets in motion a different carload of clichés.

And that other man happens to be played by Owen Wilson at his patented, irresistible, “good old [sexually promiscuous and overgrown] boy” worst.

Meanwhile George, although innocent of any wrongdoing, is investigated for stock fraud. This proves to be a mere plot device, however, in an effort

to give the film some heft. We never get to see Lisa, supposedly despondent over losing her position on the softball team, actually playing the game or showing any passion for it. The writer-director apparently expects us to take this for granted.

This is intended to be a film rich in character development, but except for Rudd, who is an attractive presence on the screen as the young stock broker, everyone grates.

Most egregious of all is Jack Nicholson, who plays George's father, Charles Madison, and owner of the financial institution both have an interest in. First, the relationship between the two strains credulity. Would a father be likely to ask his son to take the rap for stock fraud and face twenty years in jail? Nicholson's performance consists of one note, and an irritating one at that. He hardly abandons for a second the smug cynicism that has, unfortunately, become a trademark.

A Hollywood source close to the project—Amy Pascal, Sony Pictures co-chairman—is quoted as saying that “No one captures the messiness, the frailty or the integrity of humanity with the kind of wit and affection [writer-director] Jim Brooks does.”

Bah, humbug! Brooks (a creator also of television's *The Simpsons* and *Taxi*) has often shown a talent for combining comedy and (semi-)tragedy in attractive packages. Witness, for example, *Terms of Endearment* and *Broadcast News*. But are we to assume that his characters, for the most part career-driven middle class types, represent all of “humanity,” either socially or psychologically?

Brooks' vision is limited, to say the least; his concerns are mostly with the well-to-do, and their fairly trivial activities, at that. For a filmmaker whose work is labeled “realistic,” the greater and more pressing outside world hardly interferes with his characters'

personal troubles.

If one assumes that as executive producer of *The Simpsons*, Brooks has some say in the show's content, then he has to be given credit for helping to take satirical pot shots at some of the more obvious stupidities and excesses of American society. Although elements of condescension and worse also rear their head. Presumably Brooks is a liberal, who would like people to be more tolerant and flexible. His approach seems rather eclectic and he exhibits no strong sense of outrage over the way things are.

Perhaps his *Broadcast News*, released in 1987, was his strongest effort, predicting as it did the inane levels to which television news would sink, but it wasn't all that much. The work also had the misfortune of being undercut by a much better and more hard-hitting film a decade before, Sidney Lumet's *Network* (1976).

It is hard to believe that a film as insipid as *How Do You Know* took Brooks five years to write and develop. Supposedly, it was "rooted in an encounter between two people who meet on the worst night of their lives"—i.e., in the end product, George finds out he has been accused of fraud and Lisa has been dropped from her team. Inspiring material.

According to another Sony source, Brooks approached the film almost as an investigative reporter, doing extensive research on at least two of the social types who inhabit the film. He reportedly interviewed hundreds of women who play sports. Unfortunately, Reese Witherspoon, a wonderful actress elsewhere, is just not believable as the ex-softball player. Her concerns become petty and immature.

But in the field of immaturity, self-centeredness and sheer stupidity, she's no match for Owen Wilson as the self-adoring pitcher for the Washington Nationals. And how could Lisa fall, even briefly, for such a narcissist? It is one of the contradictions in character and relationship development that the film never addresses.

Apparently, Brooks also became "fascinated by the dilemmas of contemporary business executives." In the middle of the swindle perpetrated by hundreds of Wall Street CEOs on the American public, however, Brooks chooses to portray his CEO as one who is not only innocent, but totally unaware of the law governing corporate behavior. The task falls to Jack Nicholson to play the foil to his son, but even he cannot explain the reasons for his cheating in any way that makes sense or

is related to today's realities on Wall Street.

All said, there is one aspect of Brooks' film that must be placed on the plus side. It truly captures some aspects of Washington DC that film-viewers never see in movies: away from the monumental and into some interesting and lively neighborhoods such as Adams Morgan (very international), Logan Circle and even downtown.

But aside from that, *How Do You Know* now vies with *Morning Glory*, a film about the inanities of television news, for worst film of the fall-winter season.

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