

# Jason Bateman's *Bad Words*: An inauspicious debut

By Joanne Laurier  
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*Directed by Jason Bateman; screenplay by Andrew Dodge*

*Bad Words*, a would-be comedy directed by actor and first-time feature filmmaker Jason Bateman, is a chilly, largely humorless movie. Laden with consciously “politically incorrect” and misanthropic language, the unpleasant film is not saved by Bateman’s dry, understated delivery. The actor-director’s comic skills were most notably on display in the television series *Arrested Development* (2003-06).

Here Bateman plays Guy Trilby, a petulant, miserable 40-year-old who breaks into the spelling bee circuit by taking advantage of a loophole in the rules. (That an acknowledged “genius” never completed the eighth grade strains credulity, however.) An adult competing against adolescents or preadolescents, Guy is not welcomed by either the officious directors of the spelling contests nor by the ambitious participants and their even more ambitious parents. This is in part due to his nonstop insults, laced with obscenities, involving ethnicity, sexuality and all things below the belt.

In a plot contrivance, Guy is being shadowed by a twitchy, squinting journalist, Jenny (Kathryn Hahn), whose news outlet is inexplicably financing the middle-aged man’s spelling bee junkets. Guy and Jenny’s sporadic sexual liaisons provide an additional outlet for the movie’s rampant and generally sophomoric “naughtiness.”

Early on in the movie, Guy becomes the object of fascination for a bright-eyed, super-enthusiastic, ten-year-old spelling competition favorite, Chaitanya (Rohan Chand), a boy of East Asian heritage. The chink in Guy’s emotional armor soon widens (surprise, surprise!). In turn, despite his worst—or best—intentions, Guy begins to loosen the boy’s straitlaced existence.

Needless to say, a monkey wrench is thrown into

Guy’s vengeful plans (to redress what turns out to be a get-over-yourself trauma) and, in a key scene, Chaitanya explosively reminds those inclined to stereotype him that he hails from Cleveland.

Bateman and screenwriter Andrew Dodge seem in control of their material, although the amateurishly constructed *Bad Words* is Dodge’s initial movie script. The problem is the material itself, and the filmmakers’ trivial preoccupations. Unhappily, the schoolboy, anti-PC wit (or witlessness) seems entirely at one with a strained, paltry storyline.

There is wasted talent in abundance here: the versatile Allison Janney flops as an overbearing contest bureaucrat and veteran Philip Baker Hall barely registers as another spelling bee bigwig. Bateman, Hahn and the young Chand are all remarkable actors. But the strenuousness of their combined efforts tends to feel like overcompensation for the script’s threadbare characterizations and devices—one experiences the psychological and plot mechanisms huffing and puffing.

Bateman is a gifted and deservedly popular performer. His extraordinary turn as Dominic Foy, a pill-addicted public relations executive, for example, in *State of Play* (2009), not a very good film, demonstrated definitively that he was far more than merely a light-comic actor.

Why Bateman, who has a wide-ranging history in film and television, would undertake a project such as *Bad Words* yields few satisfying answers. In the movie’s production notes, the actor-director explains he wanted a script in which a man starts off isolated and by “the end of this story, he ends up with a family that may or may not be his own... The idea of a person wrestling with, and searching for, his own identity and what that means has always been something I’ve been

attracted to as well.”

Something in the Bateman character’s hunt for himself has a semi-tragic element, as might the film if all the juvenilia were cleared away. Bateman is a serious actor and the chronic anguish registered on his face in *Bad Words* belongs in a different, worthier movie.

Nonetheless, the director’s comments almost beg this response: Under the present volatile circumstances, is this all you could come up with?

In another interview, Bateman addresses the micro-universe of spelling bee contests, glibly commenting: “So the kids here, the judges here, the parents here, it’s all kind of dank.” (“Dank” is defined as “disagreeably damp, musty, and typically cold.”)

He continues: “People in this world are sort of on the fringes of society that we live in. They are people that you drive by but never really talk to. They are kind of all around us. And as a result of that they are capable of things that we wouldn’t necessarily do, my character one of them. They can justify their behaving in a way that they’re not super-consistent with what society is used to.”

It would even seem that *Bad Words*, with its “dirty talk” and contrived racialism, is meant to be some sort of antiestablishment film. But this is the antiestablishmentism of those living in a cocoon (a peculiar Hollywood cocoon), who imagine their amorphously rough-edged movie is “pushing the envelope.”

The representation of super-focused oddballs in Bateman’s film is not terribly intriguing. This monomaniacal universe could be interesting if the movie showed even a modicum of concern for the bigger reality of a social order spinning out of control. In such a context, the self-imposed isolation and alienation of the individuals might have more weight and be rendered more meaningful, to say the least. As it is, *Bad Words* is another indication of a stagnating industry that has little to say at present.

After all, why does the movie pick on—of all things!—the spelling bee crowd? Is there not a vast number of more tempting and deserving targets in America at present, from the White House, Congress, the Pentagon and Wall Street on down?

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