

Trainwreck: The latest from Judd Apatow

By David Walsh
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Directed by Judd Apatow; written by Amy Schumer

Trainwreck is the latest effort from Judd Apatow, who as either producer, director or writer (or sometimes as two or more of these) is responsible, or partially responsible, for two dozen or so comedy films since the early 2000s, including *Anchorman*, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Talladega Nights*, *Knocked Up*, *Superbad*, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, *Pineapple Express*, *Bridesmaids*, *Wanderlust*, *This is 40* and others. Apatow is something of a “brand name” at this point.

In *Trainwreck*, Amy Schumer, the stand-up comic and writer, is the psychological mess of the title. Devoted to a father (Colin Quinn), a cantankerous, hard-drinking womanizer, who put it into the heads of his two daughters at an early age that “monogamy isn’t realistic,” Amy, in her early 30s, is a hard-drinking and promiscuous journalist.

Assigned by her horrid British-born editor, Dianna (a relatively unrecognizable Tilda Swinton), to do a story on a sports doctor, Aaron Connors (Bill Hader), Amy finds herself in the uncomfortable and unexpected position of caring for someone and having someone care for her.

Amy’s sister Kim (Brie Larson) leads a more conventional suburban, middle class life, with a husband (Mike Birbiglia) and a stepson (Evan Brinkman). The sisters often quarrel, either about their father, of whom Kim strongly disapproves, or Amy’s life-style.

Aaron is something of an innocent. His life is given over to medicine, including doing volunteer work for Doctors Without Borders. Because of his profession, he is friends with various athletes, including basketball star LeBron James.

Amy responds with genuine terror to Aaron’s uncomplicated notion that since the two of them care for one another, they should go on seeing each other.

She fears, as they say, “commitment” and “intimacy.” Her father’s influence is apparently to blame.

In any event, to no one’s possible surprise, Amy and Aaron come together in *Trainwreck* and try their hand at a relationship, get into difficulty (due to her irresponsibility and his emotional rigidity) and fall apart, and, by movie’s end, decide to give it another go.

This is not a good film. It is difficult to tell how talented Schumer (a relative of US Senator Charles Schumer, one of Wall Street’s leading mouthpieces!) may be. There are perhaps half a dozen genuinely amusing moments in the film. Schumer actually seems best at physical comedy. Her bit on a treadmill and as a cheerleader is entertaining. And there are times when her face expresses a mobility and a mischievousness that are not reflected in the script or the action.

The situations in *Trainwreck* are not especially interesting or comic, or moving. Strained gags, overdone bits, dull patches and clichés take the place of plot or character development for the most part. One looks at one’s watch. The conclusion could hardly be more conventional and “family values” oriented.

The film veers between a nastiness that seems unaccountable, and an occasional genuine sweetness. The latter is provided, for the most part, by Hader, who is appealing here, and LeBron James, unexpectedly. James is quite charming as a friend looking out for Aaron’s best interests, who sternly quizzes Amy, for example, about her “intentions.”

The downright meanness is not amusing, and, for the most part, makes no sense, aside from a few legitimate (but rather easy) shots at the tabloid magazine industry. *Trainwreck* goes out of its way to poke demeaning fun at Steven (John Cena), Amy’s muscle-bound boyfriend toward the beginning of the film, but one can never figure out why, or where the mockery is going. The sex scene between Amy and Steven is simply an

embarrassment, or should be, for everyone involved.

The “Apatow Touch,” on display here, unfortunately involves painting nearly everyone on screen at certain moments as an awkward, unpleasant moron. That purpose fulfilled, the character the next time he or she appears may be portrayed in an entirely different, perhaps quite sentimental light. All too often there is no rhyme or reason other than the immediate search for cheap laughs.

The casual misanthropy and bitterness in the films churned out by the “Apatow school” are peculiar and unattractive. They seem to express the general frustrations, disappointments and self-doubt of this particular portion of the American upper middle class, which both promotes itself aggressively and fights for its place in the sun and, at the same time, has the nagging sensation that its artistic products are tawdry and trivial, and a waste of time. Nothing is worked through, nothing is entirely convincing or heartfelt, and then a program is made out of the lack of completeness and sincerity.

The critics like to refer to the “refreshing” and “truthful” character of Apatow’s films. To each his own, but only under a very narrow definition could revelations about this or that bodily function or body part be construed as ground-breakingly “truthful.” Almost everything important lies outside this film, and films like it.

There is some talent on display in *Trainwreck*, but until something dramatic is done about the entire approach to comedy and life, nothing much should be expected from this quarter.

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