

Zack and Miri Make a Romantic Comedy

Long before its release in theatres, Kevin Smith's latest movie, *Zack and Miri Make a Porno*, was in the headlines. Given a NC-17 rating by the Motion Picture Association, the major studio movie seemed destined to be shown at your local brown bag store rather than your neighborhood multiplex. Knowing that his film could not make money with a NC-17 rating, Smith appealed to the board and the rating was changed to an R. Even after this success, controversy loomed; some theatres refused to display promotional material for the movie, no doubt due to that five letter word in the title. Some theatres went further and refused to show the movie at all (this includes virtually every theatre in Utah).

Smith, a director known for his disdain of censorship, is no stranger to controversy. His 1999 film, *Dogma*, angered many religious groups, and perhaps with good reason; the story centers on an abortion clinic worker who must save the earth from two renegade angels and, in the process, becomes divinely impregnated with the final descendant of Jesus Christ. Those who were outraged at Smith's previous work are no doubt up in arms over his latest movie.

Despite the pleas of its detractors, *Zack and Miri* has been released to theatres across the country (that is, unless you live in Utah). It is no doubt that some people will buy tickets just to see if the film lives up to the controversy. What they will find is a movie that attempts to be both irreverent and endearing, ultimately succeeding in varying degrees. The movie begins simply enough: lifelong friends Zach and Miri, played by Seth Rogen and Elizabeth Banks, cannot pay their bills. In a plot twist that is both far-fetched and contrived, they decide that the most logical solution to their money woes is to make a porno. The rest of the film centers on this quest; they must write the script, hire a cast, find a venue, and shoot the scenes.

However, such clear and proper language does not do this movie justice. Put simply, this movie is dirty. One scene, which Smith has codenamed “the icing,” certainly pushes the movie’s R rating to its limits. The codename has little to do with the scene itself, but those who see the movie will have little doubt as to which scene I am referring. The writing complexity is most clearly shown in Rogan’s most often repeated line: “Let us fuck.” While not as overt as in pornography, the sex scenes in the film are more graphic than you would find in your typical R-rated movie.

Although this film has all the marks of a Kevin Smith film (most notably the casting of Jason Mewes, a lifelong friend of the director whose entire career seems to consist of waiting for Smith to give him another role), I could not help but think Smith was influenced by another highly successful director. Judd Apatow has become the golden boy of comedy, releasing such hits as *The Forty Year Old Virgin*, *Knocked Up*, and *Superbad*. Both Elizabeth Banks and Seth Rogan have been in numerous Apatow movies and play largely the same characters in Smith’s film, with Rogan as the overweight but lovable slacker and Banks as the screwball friend who is stunningly unaware of how attractive she is. However, the similarities go beyond casting. Although his movies are marked by crude and often sophomoric humor, Apatow’s films have a softer romantic lean that allows them to be accepted by a larger audience.

Smith attempts this same crossover in his film. Underlying the scenes of graphic sex and crude humor is the romantic tension that grows between the two lead characters. Ironically, the film’s final message is not unlike the one held by the film’s detractors; sex is about love, not money. However, those of us who would be touched by the final message of this surprisingly formulaic romantic comedy are ultimately mortified by the vehicle of the film, that is, pornography. Those that remain are left to wonder what sets this movie apart from the other

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romantic comedies they have grown accustomed to seeing. The answer is, aside from a subject matter that stretches the limits of an R- rating, not much.