

MOVIE REVIEW

# Slight, earnest indie drama

Adult Beginners' explores familiar territory

BY LINDSEY BAHR  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

"Are you happy?" is the prevailing question of its fair share of indie dramas.

The cinema of borderline depressive thirtysomethings living in reasonably pleasant suburban environs might as well be a genre unto itself. While it's still a valid premise for exploration, its latest entry, "Adult Beginners," does little to take the conceit to any new or surprising places.

This coming home tale begins with an instant fall for Jake (Nick Kroll), a hedonistic entrepreneur on the eve of launching a Google Glass-like product. At the height of Jake sparty, literally and metaphorically, as the champagne is flowing and the girls in sparkly mini-dresses (including "Masters of Sex" star Caitlin FitzGerald in a blink-and-miss-it role) hover around the future millionaire, Jake finds out there's a problem with the manufacturer. In an instant, everything is gone.

Jake decides he has to leave Manhattan and shows up on the suburban doorstep of sister Justine (Rose Byrne) for a three-month escape from his life and failure. She's overwhelmed by his sudden appearance, but accommodating. Newly pregnant and raising her three-year-old son, Teddy (Caleb and Matthew Paddock) with her husband, Danny (Bobby Cannavale), Justine has her own set of issues too.

Without much pain, Danny soon transitions seamlessly into being a caretaker for Teddy. One of the achievements of "Adult Beginners" is how it doesn't exaggerate circumstance for drama or comedy. Here, Danny just learns how to do it and the story moves on.

Jake and Justine bicker and make up and reach a few revelations, the most notable of which involves the trauma of their mother's death from cancer and how it affected their lives. And yet, while the actors are likable, it's a struggle to find any emotional connection to their lives.

At the very least, Kroll, in one of his first leading roles, proves that he might just have a promising career in film outside of character parts. The comedian, known for his role in the TV series "The League" and his over-the-top sketch series "The Kroll Show," has both depth and presence in "Adult Beginners" as a man whose life has been thrown into question.

Byrne, meanwhile, is given a few terrific moments, both comedic and dramatic. She has an easy chemistry with Kroll and im-



Nick Kroll and Rose Byrne in a scene from "Adult Beginners."

bues Justine with a depth that isn't necessarily on the page.

Unfortunately, Cannavale, who is also in a relationship with Byrne in real life, isn't given much to do aside from being a convenient plot device - acting as the cheating husband who also might be a good guy.

Director Ross Katz, in his sophomore effort, packs the film with notable actors in supporting parts, including Joel McHale, Bobby Moynihan, Jane Krakowski, Josh Charles, Mike Birbiglia and Jason Mantzoukas. But, as with the rest of the film, these charismatic actors keep in line with the mostly understated tone of the entire endeavour. At best, they're missed opportunities.

Brothers Jay and Mark Duplass, credited as executive producers here, have turned this type of story into a veritable cottage industry, and it's getting tiresome. This almost feels like an East Coast extension of their HBO show "Togetherness."

It's hard to fault such an earnest movie just because it happens to be exploring a well-worn idea. "Adult Beginners" is a fine slice-of-life drama that hits all the predictable points.

But perhaps it could have benefited from a little more of the comedic energy and subversive spirit that Bryne, Kroll and Cannavale have all proved more than capable of in previous roles.

Two stars out of four

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