

TV Review: FX's New Animated Series 'Unsupervised' Offers Fresh Take on Teens

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CHICAGO – It's tough being a high school freshman nowadays. Your parents either don't pay enough attention to you or they pay way too much. There's peer pressure everywhere — smoking, partying, getting laid. What happened to just playing with toys and jumping off the roof? FX's "Unsupervised" attempts to turn these tumultuous days into humor and partially succeeds. Tonight's premiere has its moments but it follows an amazing half-hour of animated TV in "Archer" and will pale in comparison.



Television Rating: **3.0/5.0**

Let's talk about what really matters — is "Unsupervised" funny? There are undeniably clever lines and smile-producing twists of character well-voiced by an extremely talented cast of actors. But great animated comedies are more than just a string of jokes — they come together on another level in terms of plot and character. Mediocre animated comedies are joke, set-up, joke, set-up, joke, etc. While there's honest effort at more than this structure in "Unsupervised," the characters are a bit too annoying and unbelievable for it to transcend into the upper tier of adult animation. In other words, this is more "Bob's Burgers" than "South Park."



Unsupervised

Photo credit: FX

Gary (Justin Long) and Joel (David Hornsby of "How to Be a Gentleman") are total dorks. They need haircuts, have acne, enjoy jumping off the roof, and have just started having wet dreams. Being a freshman blows. Gary's stepmom barely pays any attention to him at all, so the boys spend most of their time there doing what they want, often in ways reminiscent of "Beavis and Butthead: The High School Years." The writers of "Unsupervised" (which include Hornsby) smartly realize that another slacker kid story wouldn't have worked and so don't make Gary and Joel TOO dumb. They're just a bit socially maladjusted, like most of were in high school.



Unsupervised
Photo credit: FX

Circling around the boys are a cast of unusual characters — school friends Darius (Romany Malco of “Weeds”) & Megan (Kristen Bell of “House of Lies”), social misfit Russ (co-creator Rob Rosell), and a cast of townspeople played by Kaitlin Olson (“It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia”), Fred Armisen (“Portlandia”), Alexa Vega (“Spy Kids”), and Sally Kellerman (“M*A*S*H”).

The best thing about “Unsupervised” is the optimism of Gary and Joel. When they encounter a morbid, drug-addicted new girl at school, Gary compliments the “cool drawing” she’s carving into her arm. When the girl is caught snorting Megan’s “period drugs,” they’re proud of their friend for becoming a woman. Gary and Joel don’t just make fun of everyone, they’re still at that age where they believe everything will be OK at the end of the day. They’re not cynical teenagers yet, just big kids in a cynical world. That’s a fun approach to the life of the teenager that hasn’t really been seen before. Not every teenager hates life. Some, like Gary and Joel, are still big kids who just don’t know what to do with the crazy new life that they’ve found in high school. When they meet a girl in the second episode that seems to have a perfect life, they can’t believe she’s depressed enough to do drugs. They don’t really even understand teenage depression yet.

The voice talent in “Unsupervised” is undeniably strong but I have to admit that it’s hard to get used to actors like Long, Bell, and Malco playing teenagers (Hornsby has a less recognizable voice). None of them really sound like kids, which makes their delivery a little unusual. Having said that, they’re talented actors who clearly enjoy this material. Bell, Armisen, and Vega sometimes steal the piece from the leads. The dynamic between Armisen’s over-protective father and his daughter played by Vega produces the biggest laughs. And Bell is perfectly cast as a girl who wants to behave but finds herself getting wasted in the first episode and becoming a pothead in the second one.

“Unsupervised” could eventually be a great show. Right now it’s an interesting one with a few clever jokes and a remarkably talented voice cast but it’s inconsistent (a shirtless neighbor named Sid is particularly annoying and seemingly from another show). The writers need to decide if they’re going for hipster surrealism or teenage realism. The middle ground right now is leaving the show a bit tonally lost and inconsistent. The potential is there. Perhaps the team behind the show just needs a little more supervision.

“Unsupervised” features voice work by Justin Long, David Hornsby, Romany Malco, Kristen Bell, Rob Rosell, Kaitlin Olson, Fred Armisen, Alexa Vega, and Sally Kellerman. It premieres on FX on Thursday, January 19th, 2012 at 9:30pm CST.



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