

Robert De Niro, Ben Stiller Seem Bored in Tepid ‘Little Fockers’

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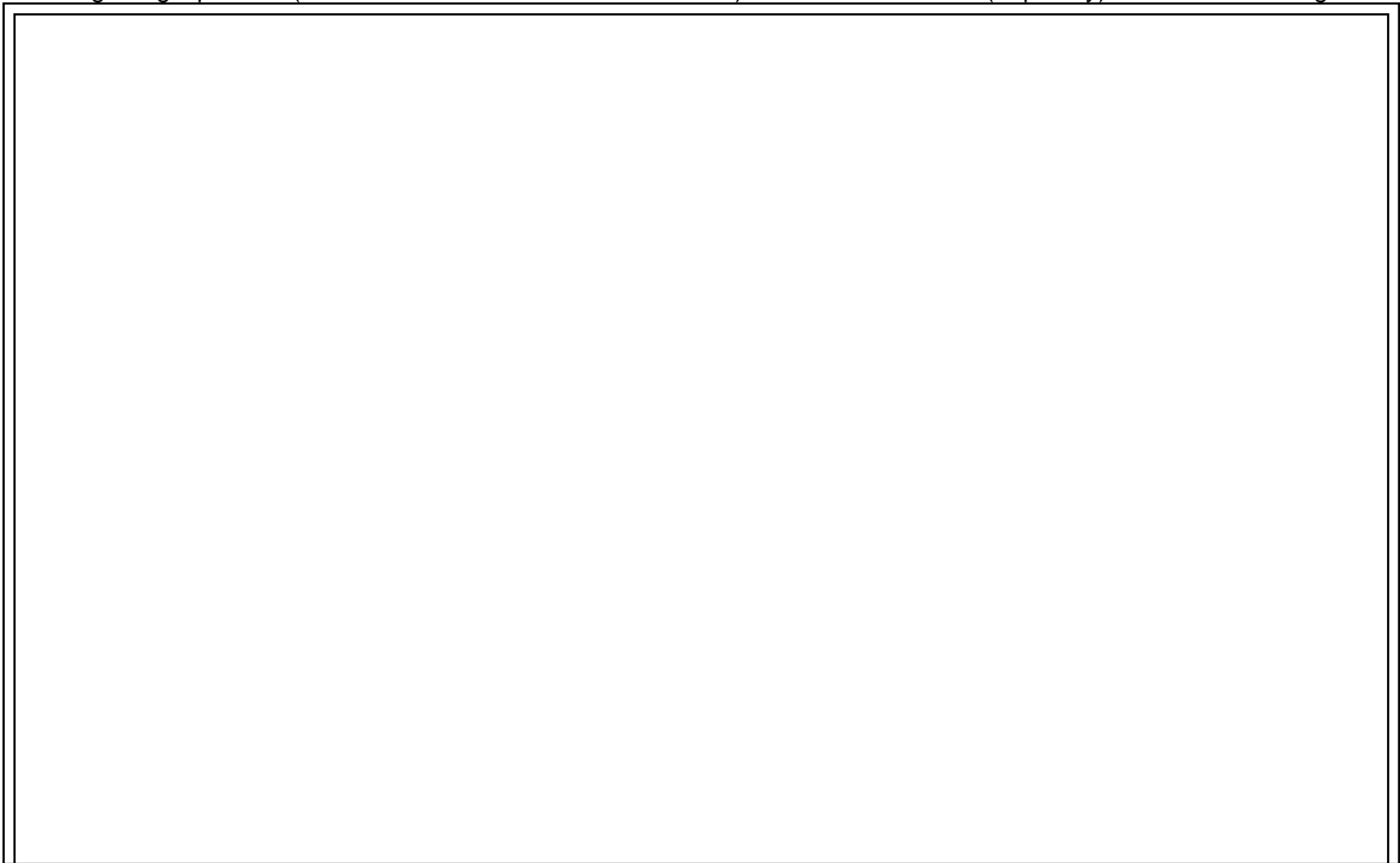


CHICAGO – The Law of Diminishing Returns is alive and well in the “Meet the Parents” Franchise, as the third film in the series, “Little Fockers,” has a lazy, we-did-it-for-the-money veneer. They got the gang back together, Robert De Niro, Ben Stiller, Owen Wilson, Barbra Streisand and the rest, but with few exceptions they all seem bored with it all.

Ben Stiller is Gaylord “Greg” Focker, now a nurse administrator for a Chicago hospital. His wife Pam (Teri Polo) stays home with their precocious twins, the little Fockers of the title. Greg’s contrary father-in-law, Jack Byrnes (Robert De Niro), suffers a minor heart attack and decides that a new Byrnes patriarch must be designated. He taps Greg for the job.

While this bit of news settles in, Greg also has to deal with a pharmaceutical salesperson at work named Andi Garcia (Jessica Alba), who wants him to represent a new erectile dysfunction drug at a series of conferences. There closeness in working together arouses Jack’s ire, who begins to suspect that Greg is having an affair with the drug rep, and begins using his covert operation former CIA techniques to determine the truth of the matter.

At the same time Greg’s arch nemesis, Kevin Rawley (Owen Wilson), comes back to Chicago after a busted engagement. He still carries a crush for Pam, and his heroic homecoming in the midst of Jack’s search for a new Byrnes patriarch throws another wrench into Greg’s difficult relationship with his father-in-law. All the factors come together at the Focker twins’ birthday party, hosted lavishly by Kevin, and featuring Greg’s parents (Dustin Hoffman and Barbra Streisand) and the culmination (hopefully) of the Focker’s legend.





Jack (Robert De Niro) Gets the Wrong Finger from Greg (Ben Stiller) in ‘Little Fockers’

Photo Credit: © Universal Pictures

The plot relies on a series of misunderstandings, which could be easily rectified with a bit of truth here or there, but the screenplay prefers the dumb moments to keep an artificial conflict between Greg and Jack. As Greg is portrayed in the film, he is the ultimate daddy domestic, with his twin kids for comic relief. What granddad patriarch wouldn't love that? So to shoehorn the affair sidebar just to create tension smacks of desperation.

The story also depends on shock elements as the major comedic themes. Note that the pharmaceutical rep is selling an erectile dysfunction drug. Watch out for wacky genitalia humor! Robert De Niro, in his long and mostly distinguished career, experiences a new low with his drug interaction. There is a scene between him and Stiller dealing with the result of this interaction that made me wonder if anyone had read the script before agreeing to do it.

The point is nobody seems to be trying in this film at all, especially the two leads. Greg and Jack are kind of grumpy throughout the story and their mood permeates the rest of the cast. Owen Wilson, who is fully acclimated back to his “Owen Wilson” type roles, is taken to a new height of ridiculousness with the Kevin character. Tattooing a picture of another man's wife onto his lower back would be grounds for arrest in normal society, but in Fockerland elicits nothing more than an admiring shrug.

Only Barbra Streisand and Jessica Alba seem to be having any fun in the movie. Streisand because she is working and gets to wear her 1970s perm wig again, and Alba because she is playing a pure comic role. Her pharmaceutical rep is caffeinated (or more, she does sell drugs) charm, all high fives and twentysomething aphorisms (“dude, I’m stoked”). Alba also has one of the strange shock stunts that passes for comedy with the Fockers, but this one actually works. Let's just say that the sex drug works just as well for the gals in this fantasy scenario.



Andi Garcia (Jessica Alba) Adds Some Life to ‘Little Fockers’
Photo Credit: © Universal Pictures

It seems to be part of the movie glossary that the more money thrown at a comedy, the less comedy there will be. Little Fockers is glossy and has complex set pieces (Kevin’s party set-up for the twins would be grounds for another arrest), plus has an impressive cast of Oscar winners (De Niro, Hoffman, Streisand) and supporting talent (Laura Dern and Harvey Keitel). What they don’t have is the funny.

An indication that the curtain is coming down on the Fockers is the final, most cynical scene. It is a holiday gathering, where the Oscar laden in-laws gather one more time to contemplate the twilight of their careers. The film comes out at Christmas, and there is a tacked-on holiday sequence? I’m shocked, shocked that Little Fockers wasn’t also in 3-D.

“Little Fockers” opens everywhere December 22nd. Featuring Robert De Niro, Ben Stiller, Owen Wilson, Dustin Hoffman, Barbra Streisand, Blythe Danner, Teri Polo, Laura Dern, Jessica Alba and Harvey Keitel. Screenplay by John Hamburg and Larry Stuckey, directed by Paul Weitz. Rated “PG-13”.



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