

Jason Reitman, Diablo Cody Sway Us to Like the Unlikable in 'Young Adult'

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- [Adam Fendelman](#) [2]
- [Charlize Theron](#) [3]
- [Collette Wolfe](#) [4]
- [Diablo Cody](#) [5]
- [Elizabeth Reaser](#) [6]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [7]
- [Jason Reitman](#) [8]
- [Jill Eikenberry](#) [9]
- [Juno](#) [10]
- [Movie Review](#) [11]
- [Patrick Wilson](#) [12]
- [Patton Oswalt](#) [13]
- [Richard Bekins](#) [14]
- [Up in the Air](#) [15]
- [Young Adult](#) [16]



Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Mavis Gary (Charlize Theron) isn't a girl you'd Facebook like. She's got one too many dark passengers, she's a repugnant drunk, she likes too much pink, her white dog is too puffy and most would consider it less than Usher cool that she's throwing herself at a married man she couldn't bag back in high school. Or is she? And is Mavis so different than you?

Those are director Jason Reitman and writer Diablo Cody's key questions in their new collab "Young Adult" about one woman's late-blooming arrested development. And questions they remain long after the credits roll. Reitman – the son of the legendary "Ghostbusters" filmmaker Ivan Reitman – is a non-message man. He doesn't believe in them. Instead, he's an open-ended, open-minded mystery man who wants you to think for yourself – or at least think at all. We'll learn more on that when we publish our "Young Adult" interview with Reitman this weekend.



Patrick Wilson (left) and a bitterly jealous Charlize Theron (right) in "Young Adult".

Image credit: *Paramount Pictures*

Does Mavis behave badly any more so than anyone else? Have you had similar thoughts even if you’ve never acted on them? Are people good, bad or – as Reitman believes – simply complicated?

Oscar-winning “Juno” director Diablo Cody, who last hopped in Hollywood’s bed with Reitman for 2007’s “Juno,” has since then penned the appalling “Jennifer’s Body” and fascinating “United States of Tara” on Showtime. And since “Juno,” Reitman has written and directed George Clooney’s Oscar-nominated “Up in the Air”. With so much talent between this new power duo and these still relatively new writers and directors, “Young Adult” doesn’t disappoint.



Charlize Theron (left) and Patton Oswalt in “Young Adult”.

Image credit: Phillip V. Caruso

Soon after her divorce, Mavis returns to her home in small-town Minnesota. (Cody, who’s originally from Chicago, moved to Minnesota to live with her Internet boyfriend, Jonny, who she later married. Cody’s writing usually always involves Minnesota.) The dark side of Mavis wants to reignite a romance with her ex-boyfriend, Buddy Slade (Patrick Wilson), who is now married with kids.

While Buddy entertains the friendship, Mavis desperately wants more and fails miserably to get it. Meanwhile, a crippled Matt Freehauf (Patton Oswalt) develops a friendship – and an unlikely romance – with Mavis while she fails to convert her white knight into the dark soul she is.

Under Reitman’s direction, what’s most alluring about Mavis is she’s not theatrical. Unlike Charlize Theron’s transformation in “Monster” into a woman you wouldn’t even think was her, this Theron uniquely portrays a character not manipulated by typical cinematic ticks, image changes or voice effects. Reitman, who cast Theron because she told him a dirty joke (true story), instead creates a very human 30-something girl with whom men and women alike can relate.



Patton Oswalt in "Young Adult".
Image credit: Phillip V. Caruso

While society would be comfortable with a love match between the equally attractive Charlize Theron and Patrick Wilson, "Young Adult" bucks what's politically correct. The film indirectly poses a new question: Why not Charlize Theron with Patton Oswalt? Sure, if you label Charlize as a 9 on the 10-point Hotness Scale and Patton is a 4, the math would seem off.

But there's something about their friendship that works. They laugh, joke and are there for each other in a healthy way while Mavis slips further down her rabbit hole of destruction. Is Mavis a rotten egg or is she just still trying to grow up – albeit a bit late?



"Young Adult" director and producer Jason Reitman.
Image credit: Phillip V. Caruso

What's most bamboozling about "Young Adult" is Cody's voice. You can typically always hear her unique writing style directly through her characters. The use of trendy, pop-culture quips in her scripts has defined the 33-year-old stripper turned screenwriter. But not this time.

Though she only slips into her normal self once with the new words “textual chemistry,” Mavis’ journey from immaturity to immaturity parallels Cody’s maturation as a writer.

This time, Cody didn’t try hard to be smooth. And this time, she grew up and got deep. Instead of understanding teenage angst (“Juno”) and while she safely focuses on human torment yet again, now we fast forward beyond college and scrutinize young adult depression and melodrama in a 30-something who still hasn’t grown up and is lost along the path of trying to find her way. Sounds like several people you know, eh?



“Young Adult” star Charlize Theron.
Photo credit: Phillip V. Caruso

But while “Young Adult” is billed as a comedy and a drama, in truth it’s actually a drama that’s also a dark comedy. The film’s drama shines through vividly while it’s comedy is much more subtle and intelligent. To some, dark comedy is too subtle and “Young Adult” might leave you thinking it’s just not funny at all.

Though Mavis’ believable character is a person society would disown and brand with a big red “A,” “Young Adult” isn’t without its own manipulations. The film leads you to various beliefs, and through a few climatic developments, flips what you thought you knew. Those who want movies to end purely black or white will indignantly leave chomping on the film’s fuzzy grey matter.

While most films follow the common trap of evolving a character to a certain resolve, “Young Adult” maneuvers you into thinking Mavis will learn and change. She doesn’t. Mavis ends up right where she started and circles back to the anguish of a part loving but mostly hateful relationship with herself. Though the film isn’t perfect in its ability to keep you constantly caring and its daring story still needs some honing, the point of it all is a cliffhanger that’s left entirely up to you.

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You’ll leave feeling robbed of a common Hollywood ending if you like films that hand them to you on a silver platter. Or you’ll leave intrigued if you instead appreciate merciless and memorable filmmaking that incites you to think. The latter being more valuable in the opinion of this critic, “Young Adult” succeeds in daring to challenge Hollywood conventions while telling a story worthy of deliberating.

“Young Adult” stars Charlize Theron, Patrick Wilson, Patton Oswalt, Elizabeth Reaser, Collette Wolfe, Jill Eikenberry, Richard Bekins, Mary Beth Hurt, Kate Nowlin, Jenny Dare Paulin, Rebecca Hart, Louisa Krause, Elizabeth Ward Land, Brian McElhaney and Hettienne Park from director Jason Reitman and writer Diablo Cody. The film, which is rated “R” for language and some sexual content, has a running time of 94 minutes. “Young Adult” opened on Dec. 9, 2011.



[17]

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- [15] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/up-in-the-air>
- [16] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/young-adult>
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