

Ellen Page’s ‘Smart People’ Only as Scholarly as Zealous Senior in High School

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CHICAGO – I’m flummoxed. I know “Smart People” was *supposed* to be comedic drama with a splash of romance. Instead, I have been misled. It’s not a comedy. It’s not a tragedy. It’s not even a tragicomedy.

“Smart People” is a blandly scripted “poor me” with an attempt at a plot and some glitzy Hollywood names thrown in for good box-office measure.




While I know this was no “[Juno](#) [19],” I couldn’t help cursing first-time writer Mark Poirier for not taking a much-needed *page* – or a full-fledged course of mentoring – from [Oscar-winning](#) [20] “Juno” inker [Diablo Cody](#) [21].

“Smart People” is also a product of another newbie: first-time director Noam Murro.

Since her “Juno” stardom in 2007 – and actually her big-screen break out even before that in 2005’s “Hard Candy” – 21-year-old Ellen Page has righteously warranted her way on Hollywood’s “A” list.

My draw to “Smart People” was Page and Page alone. While she’s always a professional who crafts the best she can from the material she’s handed, an actor ultimately is a slave to his or her script. “Smart People” offensively held Page back whereas “Juno” unleashed her.

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I continued my mental cursing at Poirier when Page was forced to deliver lines that artificially made her *sound* smart. Instead, they just made it clear he's trying way too hard and just not getting it. While I still enjoyed her performance because of the accolade woven deeply into her skin, she's better than this.

Since "Juno," Page has been being picky in the roles she has signed onto and has even dropped out of some. In Feb. 2008, [Page pulled out](#) [23] of Sam Raimi's upcoming horror-thriller "Drag Me to Hell" due to unhappiness with the script. Page was eventually [replaced by Alison Lohman](#) [24].

Poirier did, though, do one thing right: Thomas Haden Church.

In his supporting role, Church (from "Sideways" fame) is hand's down the film's savior and is generally a delicious feast through all his screen time. He's the laissez-faire relief to help you cut through all the downbeat depression. Even he, though, is sometimes scripted predictably.

You just know he's pegged to be that slipshod, toking doofus whose ass you're going to glimpse through silly pajamas while in slumber.



Thomas Haden Church and Ellen Page in "Smart People".
Photo credit: IMDb

In his starring role, Dennis Quaid's character is worn down, decrepit and dismal. While he's clearly scripted that way, the problem is he unremarkably consumes most of the film but doesn't make you remember it. He just gets by. He doesn't sell it.

As a physician, Sarah Jessica Parker does very little for me despite some heartfelt attempts to convince you – and herself all the while – that she's really feeling this story.

I just can't eject her typecast "Sex and the City" persona out of my head. I kept expecting her to launch into expositions about sex, handbags or shoes.

Even more, I can't buy Quaid and Parker sitting in a love tree. Age difference completely aside, you're not sold on their romantic palpitations for each other. Their chemistry ultimately proves to be more of a repellent than a magnet.



Dennis Quaid in "Smart People".
Photo credit: IMDb

Speaking of chemistry, Church and Page? Whaaaat? No. For all that's holy, don't ever do that again.

In asking a few random moviegoers following the film what they deemed to be the film's funniest moment, several people pointed to when Quaid mounted a fence and clumsily fell down the other side in an attempt to retrieve his impounded car.

If that's its funniest moment, there's little doubt the film falls flat on its face in the comedy department. Even if it's not, there's zero question that "Smart People" is lacking here.

All in all, if you were to keep just Page and Church, cast replacements for Quaid and Parker and – well – jot an entirely new story, then we might have some people saying something actually smart.

"Smart People" opened on April 11, 2008.



[25]

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