

In Youth, It's Good to Be 'The Kings of Summer'

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- [Alison Brie](#) [2]
- [CBS Films](#) [3]
- [Gabriel Basso](#) [4]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [5]
- [Justin Vogt-Roberts](#) [6]
- [Megan Mullally](#) [7]
- [Moises Arias](#) [8]
- [Movie Review](#) [9]
- [Nick Offerman](#) [10]
- [Nick Robinson](#) [11]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [12]
- [The Kings of Summer](#) [13]



CHICAGO – Real summer movies shouldn't be about superheroes or overwrought science fiction, it should be about long days working that trigger in the animal soul that awakens a sun-warmed spirit. Writer Chris Galletta and Director Jordan Vogt-Roberts crown "The Kings of Summer."

The film harkens back to an innocence of escape, with a desire to develop a separate identity during the sometimes painful adolescence years. In the hands of Galletta and Roberts, this film becomes absurd and symbolic – sometimes overreaching in both arenas. It is the cast of the three "escapees" that bring the ideals expressed to life and wear them as badges of honor. Surprisingly (and in opposition to its "R" rating) the actors provoke an innocence behind all their decisions, counter-reacting to parental guidance in both legitimate and off-putting ways. Although it has elements of realism, the filmmakers decision to pour on the quirkiness tampers that truth a bit. But for all ages, it is nostalgia without being nostalgic, which places it right in the moment.

Joe (Nick Robinson) is clashing with his widower father Frank (Nick Offerman), a single Dad who is still processing his circumstance. Although his sister Heather (Alison Brie), tries to be a mediator, the situation starts to rise to an inevitable blow up point. Joe's best friend Patrick (Gabriel Basso) has a similar problem at a different part of the parental spectrum. His parents smother him so much that he can barely breathe.



This leads to the escape. The two boys find an appropriate plot of land in the back woods of their small Ohio town and build a ramshackle home. They are joined in the scheme by their strange classmate Biaggio (Moises Arias), who is not so much escaping as just joining into an adventure. The boys are listed as missing, and several classmates find out about the hideout. One of them, named Kelly (Erin Moriarty), becomes both an enabler and the object of Nick's affection. Is it about the girl or the freedom?

It's about both. The cool thing about the Kings is that they make their decisions based on the natural order of their hormonal induced adolescence. Everyone must leave the nest, the pull of which is something biologically inherent. Combining the "growing up" it takes to do that, or just the risk associated with those feelings, is a symbolic starting point within the boys' consciousness. Vogt-Roberts has a field day with this emotion, using some nice camera tricks and languorous slow motion to imply that sense of both freedom and angst.

The journey is about the lessons, and there are hard ones along the way. Their pilfering aside, the scene of disassembling a caught rabbit for sustenance is one of the harsh realities of roughing it for the boys. The attraction to the woman folk (and Erin Moriarty is a nicely cast example of such reverence) also harkens to the "survival of the fittest," as the relative civilizing effects of friendship are shoved aside when the possibilities of the biological imperative are brought into the jungle.

The key performances are from the boys, and Nick Robinson gives the most intuitive kick to his role. His Nick goes through the most ups and downs, and must display a shocking lack of empathy for his father's plight. Offerman's character doesn't help the scenario much, preferring fascism to parenting when push comes to shove. Their relationship is vital to the engine of the film, and provides the spark for Nick's eventual redemption.



Nick Robinson Shows His Five O'Clock Shadow in 'The Kings of Summer'
Photo credit: CBS Films

The other two boys become a sidelight to Nick's meanderings, although Gabriel Basso ("Super 8") has some highly comic scenes with his smother parents (Marc Evan Jackson and the always reliable Megan Mullally). Moises Arias as Biaggio dances on the edge of a knife with his quirky character. His eccentricities are truly annoying at some points, but in another scene with his father, truly inspired. There was a need to tamper him down a bit, but Vogt-Roberts went the other way, and gave Biaggio's odd nature too much leverage, which took the air out of some the story.

But this is a great movie to remember – or participate in – the warmth of the sun as it shines on the brief moment of youth. The longing that it can generate is all so fleeting, replaced by an occasional casual Friday and the cold air conditioned trappings of life.

"The Kings of Summer" expands its release in Chicago on June 7th. See local listings for show times and theaters. Featuring Moises Arias, Nick Robinson, Gabriel Basso, Justin Vogt-Roberts, Nick Offerman, Megan Mullally and Alison Brie. Screenplay by Chris Galletta. Directed by Jordan Vogt-Roberts. Rated "R"



[14]

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