

‘Are You Here’ Feels Like Mashup of Two Different Films

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – You would think that a film written and directed by Matthew Weiner – the creator of “Mad Men” – would be worthwhile company, especially when the cast includes Zach Galifianakis, Owen Wilson and Amy Poehler. It is disappointing to note that not only was this cliché-ridden mess unpalatable, but it also switched gears two-thirds of the way through to evoke a different mood, and that schizophrenia didn’t help the overall product.

The story of two dysfunctional friends who go to the country because one of them has inherited the farm sounds ho-hum just in that description, and everything that happens seems wedged in by presenting a series of assigned stereotypes instead of interesting characters. Owen Wilson, now pushing 50, is again portraying his familiar puppy dog womanizer character, which is now as creaky as his standard tousled hair cut. Zach Galifianakis again plays the puffy and confused stoner manboy, but at least he gets a significant twist towards the end. This is one of those rare films that gets more intriguing in the last act, only to have the curtain come down and provide a collective, “what?”

Steve (Wilson) is a local Virginia weatherman known for his appetite for alcohol, marijuana and women. He lives a surface oriented life, barely coming up for air, except in taking care of his childhood friend Ben (Galifianakis). When Ben finds out his father has passed away, he must go back to his rural childhood home and attend the funeral. He takes Steve along, and at the reading of the will Ben finds out that he has inherited his father’s assets, a grocery store and a farm.



Ben (Zach Galifianakis), Steve (Owen Wilson) and Terry (Amy Poehler) Spar in ‘Are You Here’

Photo credit: Millennium Entertainment

This angers his sister Terry (Amy Poehler), who wants to challenge the inheritance. In the meantime, there is the matter of their father’s much younger widow Angela (Laura Ramsey), who receives little from the estate and has no place to go. Steve, Ben and Angela become temporary housemates, and their interactions begin to cause changes in both Ben and Steve. Some redemptions and revelations follow, as the characters take different paths.

What is surprising to anyone used to Weiner’s work on “Mad Men” is that this script is weak, with broadly drawn character types – womanizer, stoner, hippie, angry relative – that have none of the subtlety of Don Draper’s world. The script and film has been in development for years, and shows in the number of shifts it takes in the story. Oddly too, there is significant female nudity, all fairly gratuitous, with little or no point to it. Maybe Weiner is getting back at the restrictions of basic cable with “Mad Men.”

Most brittle and ill-used is Poehler as sister Terry. She is the resident naysayer to everything that Steve and Ben are up to, including the inheritance. Poehler’s natural comedic disposition – which is both sunny and edgy – is not in evidence here, as she goes to full be-yotch mode. Her one note interpretation becomes grating, and her appearances eventually are unwelcome. This is a prime example of a known comic performer taking on the wrong dramatic role, because I’m not sure that someone would give Poehler another shot at a serious persona after they see this film.

Wilson and Galifianakis have little chemistry, surprisingly, but the way the characters were drawn by Weiner does them no favors. Everything that they have done in movies before is evident in their characters, and about 45 minutes of this 112 minute film is taken up with the seen-it-before Owen and Zach Show. Wilson has one interesting scene – he has to provide supper at one point – but the rest of his performance is so throwaway that his redemption has no redeeming qualities.



Matthew Weiner (left) Directs a Scene in ‘Are You Here’

Photo credit: Millennium Entertainment

The weirdest twist of the film comes in the last half hour or so, when the character of Ben goes through a physical and emotional transition. There are notes of an almost European-like cinema, with a mystery woman – portrayed by Jenna Fischer of “The Office” – and a chance encounter. Fantasies and realities come into conflict within Ben’s consciousness, and he becomes an outside observer of what that truth has become. This was closest to a Weiner vision then anything in the film, and made it seem like two different movies.

I hope that Weiner gets another chance to make movies. His fertile mind and creativity must be able to come up with something better than a screenplay that had been picked on and rewritten for several years. Kill the clichés, feel the aura of the “Are You Here” conclusion, and turn on the laptop.

“Are You Here” has a limited release, including Chicago, on August 22nd. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Zach Galifianakis, Owen Wilson, Amy Poehler, Jenna Fischer, Laura Ramsey, Edward Hermann and Peter Bogdanovich. Written and directed by Matthew Weiner. Rated “R”

By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [17]

Senior Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com



[16]

pat@hollywoodchicago.com [16]

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