

It Hurts Trying to Laugh at ‘The Comedian’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on February 3, 2017 - 11:54am

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Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Mention this possibility...Robert De Niro portrays an aging stand-up comic who once had a popular sitcom in the 1980s...and 99% of filmgoers are in. Add that he beds a woman 25 years his junior, does community service, roasts Cloris Leachman and becomes a reality show host, and suddenly 80% of that 99 are out. That's just part of the over-extension and dread in “The Comedian.”

The film had a ton of promise it just couldn't deliver on. On the one hand, they wanted De Niro's character to take on the role of a dirty comedian – like Bob Saget of “Full House,” trying to get rid of his clean sitcom image – and for the most part the routines work and showcased De Niro at his best. On the other hand, there was the 90% (I'm into percentages in this review) of the rest of the movie, which was hackneyed movie plot clichés, pieced together by four screenplay writers (red flag alert). By the second act or so, the film becomes torture, with each scene clicking away towards the possibility that the story might end, yet pulling the rug out and still going on. With retroactive flashbacks, I still think I'm watching it, that's how long it felt.

Robert De Niro is Jackie, a New York City stand-up comic close to hitting the skids. He had some notoriety in the 1980s, appearing on popular family sitcom that had an annoying catchphrase – which fans keep shouting at him. His agent Miller (Edie Falco) can get him gigs based on the old character, but Jackie wants to move on, and his act consists of dirty humor to counteract the image.



Robert De Niro as Jackie in 'The Comedian'

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

After assaulting an audience member in a heckling incident, Jackie is sentenced to community service, where he meets another time server, Harmony (Leslie Mann), whose father Mac (Harvey Keitel) wants her to move to Florida. Jackie and Harmony hook up, much to chagrin of her father and his brother (Danny DeVito). When a chance at a comeback at the Friar's Club (a comedian society in NYC), Jackie needs to be on point to move forward.

That plot summary didn't include Charles Grodin (Jackie's so-called rival at the Friar's Club, which had actual funny people not being funny), YouTube hits, Jackie's confrontation with a hip new network executive, shoehorning a routine at a senior center (painful) and Jackie's embarrassing routine at his niece's wedding – which included misusing the talents of Patti LuPone as Danny DeVito's shrill wife. There is simply too much “poopy” (a term used with relish in the film) in this story to make it work.

Because of all this plot, the notion of character development – besides the De Niro character – was lost in every supporting role. Leslie Mann, a very funny comic actress when reciting lines written by her husband Judd Apatow, is completely glossed over in her contribution, forced to the background as “the girlfriend” in seriously stupid ways. And what about the reunion of De Niro and Keitel from “Mean Streets”? Their scene together is so awkward, old Bobby D. would have the writing team whacked...along with director Taylor Hackford (“Ray”), who with this film lives up to his last name.



Why is this Woman Laughing? Leslie Mann and the Title Character in 'The Comedian'

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

While the supporting talent is being used up, the only heat from this film comes from a few stand up routines that De Niro does. He tackled the same territory 35 years ago in "King of Comedy," and it's evident that at least he kept his chops in the rhythm of doing stand up, and he's doing a fairly modern take on dirty humor (one of the prime practitioners of that style, Jeffrey Ross, is on the screenwriter roster). However, he even kills that goodwill with the aforementioned senior center routine, and much of his comedian career is shuffled to the background once the plot had to re-emerge.

This is a classic wasted opportunity, in talent and story possibilities – stand up comics are notoriously screwed up people, and going in that direction would have been a good use of De Niro's dramatic chops – but hindsight is a fool's game in show biz. Apparently, the movie gods and De Niro's agents are content with destroying his legacy, one bad film at a time.

Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com joins Ian Simmons of KICKING THE SEAT podcast, to discuss "The Comedian," in a compare-and-contrast with the 35th Anniversary of Martin Scorsese's "King of Comedy." [CLICK HERE](#) [19] to listen and win!

"The Comedian" opens nationwide on February 3rd. Featuring Robert De Niro, Edie Falco, Danny DeVito, Harvey Keitel, Patti LuPone, Leslie Mann, Charles Grodin and Cloris Leachman. Screenplay by Art Linson, Jeffrey Ross, Richard LaGravenese and Lewis Friedman. Directed by Taylor Hackford. Rated "R"



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