

There's Something About Ben Stiller

Paul Zakrzewski

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Walking along a deserted stretch of Sixth Avenue sometime in the late 1990s, I spotted a certain well-known young actor on the street. Hands jammed down in his coat pockets, unshaven chin tucked down, he hurried past before I could remember recall his name. But for a quick moment before we crossed paths, he'd met my (quite unintentional) stare, as if challenging me to remember who he was. In truth, it's impossible to say just what Ben Stiller was thinking; his look was elusive, walled off and hard to read.

I remembered this incident recently while watching "Meet the Fockers." In case you've missed the top grossing film of his career — and possibly the highest grossing "live-action" comedy of all time — you might've heard that the sequel to "Meet the Parents" once again pits the hapless Greg Focker (Stiller) against his overly protective future father-in-law (and ex-CIA operative), Jack Byrnes (Robert De Niro). I'm not certain what accounts for the overwhelming success of this mostly mediocre movie. Maybe it's star power, or it simply that it is one of relatively few comedies to come out during these troubled times.

More likely, it's the enormously appealing presence of Barbra Streisand and Dustin

Hoffman as Greg's nutty, effusive parents. It may have been the film's original concept that adding two more Fockers only tripled the opportunities for staging the sort of humiliating situations exploited in "Meet the Parents." And Streisand and Hoffman, who play kooky, wealthy hipsters, riff on every Jewish parent stereotype imaginable. But with their warmth and chemistry these two easily transcend their limited roles, never once permitting themselves to become the butt of shameful jokes.

For better or worse, this remains Ben Stiller's territory. In "Meet the Fockers" he reprises the same neurotic shlemiel he first perfected in "There's Something About Mary", and one he's continued to play in movies such as "Flirting With Disaster," "Along Came Polly," "Duplex" and others. On the one hand, he's simply carrying on the time-honored tradition of the Jewish male comic, mining his sexual and psychological shortcomings for laughs. But there's also something deeper and more profound about the humiliations visited upon his characters.

It has something to do with the way in which the masculinity of these characters is repeatedly called into question, often in ways that resemble old stereotypes about the girly

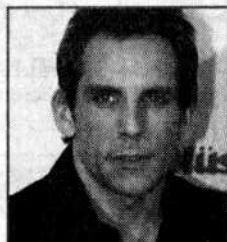
Jewish male. Often his movies go to great lengths to portray his character's impotency — quite literally in "There's Something About Mary," as when his genitals are caught in a zipper or he is harassed by schoolyard bullies; and sometimes psychologically, as with "Meet the Parents," in which he plays a male nurse, one named "Gaylord" no less. That Ben Stiller is a very talented physical comic, and plays his characters with a genuine degree of vulnerability and sweetness, makes many of these scenes all the more discomfiting to watch.

Last year the U.K.'s Observer ran a lengthy profile of Stiller, noting the nearly religious fervor he has inspired in some fans. The article quotes one who gushed: "I just saw 'The Passion of the Christ' and I think it would have been a much better movie if Ben Stiller had played Jesus." Delicious as it might be to imagine the ways in which the comic might've injected some much needed levity into Mel Gibson's gorefest, this sentiment is even more staggering may you consider what this fan was really saying. Stiller's body and mind are routinely subjected to the sorts of torments that might make even Mad Max flinch.

Yet it is precisely the source of these hu-

milating episodes that may yet lead Stiller out of the hole he's dug for himself recently. A few years ago, he modified his typical character for Wes Anderson's "The Royal Tenenbaums," playing Gene Hackman's bitterly estranged son. Despite the fine comic touches (the son dresses himself and his twin boys in the same red Adidas track outfits), here he was able to channel his humiliation and rage into a worthy (if comic) target.

Stiller has proven he can evince the sort of male vulnerability and acting range that once helped Robert Downey, Jr. and River Phoenix become two of the best actors of their generation. Maybe this is why I am now recalling our brief encounter on Sixth Avenue years ago. His glance that day reminds me of an irony I sense in nearly every character he plays: the fact an actor who is nearly unrelenting in his willingness to be humiliated on screen, should nonetheless keep playing these men closed off from themselves, unable to adapt and change from their humiliating experiences. ■



Ben Stiller:
The act of
humiliation.



Beginning next month, Paul Zakrzewski and Daniel Schiffrin will alternate the Culture View column on the fourth week of the month.