

THE AMATEURS (THE MOGULS) ____ 6/10

Worthy effort: ~ *The Big Lebowski Lite*

Written by Michael Traeger

Directed by Michael Traeger

Jeff Bridges ... Andy Sargentee
Tim Blake Nelson ... Barney Macklehatton
Joe Pantoliano ... Some Idiot
William Fichtner ... Otis
Ted Danson ... Moose
Patrick Fugit ... Emmett
Glenne Headly ... Helen Tatelbaum
Lauren Graham ... Peggy
Jeanne Tripplehorn ... Thelma
Isaiah Washington ... Homer

*I'm in. Except for no money, it's a no-brainer for me. First off, making a stag film *has* to be a good time. Number two, my hat's off to you. Good job. We can do this. Wha-what are we talking about here? Making a dirty movie - film, whatever, whatever. What does that require? Pointing a camera at a he and a she... he'in and a-she'in. — Otis*

This enthusiastic abandon of Otis (William Fichtner) gives you an idea of the characterological (!) method of the movie. In addition to Otis, who has this childish, charming kinetic all-directions-at-once quality, virtually every one of the characters is the epitome of quirk. [Which is why the movie reminds me so much of *The Big Lebowski*, at least for the Jeff Bridges role as Andy Sargentee; the key difference between *The Amateurs* and the Coen brothers' classic lies in the heavier underlying plot material of *Lebowski*.]

The Amateurs is actually formally entitled *The Moguls*, at least according to IMDb, which is probably a better title. My sense is the movie was so independent of origin, it tried for an international audience. It was difficult to find Web info on the director Michael Traeger, but it appears from this little piece in *Written By* that he's quite a match for the starving artist of integrity who becomes discovered later in life. To some extent, *The Amateurs* is that kind of story, with poor ol' Andy finally seizing on a grand idea that he hopes will bring him fame and fortune—or at least fortune—at long last.

The grand idea: a community-made pornographic movie.

Thelma (Jeanne Tripplehorn), Andy's wife, has finally divorced him for among other things urinating on his boss and getting fired. "It's just too much, Andy." She and their son Billy (Alex D. Linz) move out and eventually she connects with the richest dude in the county... so rich that Billy's suite of rooms includes a basketball half court. In fact, Andy's feeling inadequate in the financial department—there's a cute scene where Andy visits the posh new digs to give Billy a birthday present, a basketball—is what sets him on the brainstorming mission to make a lot of money.

To me this film seems to require a certain viewing environment to properly appreciate, i.e. it's probably not a family movie, even for the Osbournes of the world. What I mean is it will be embarrassing from the language standpoint if you're watching it with a person who's a generation or two one way or the other. (There are a lot of references to various sex acts, e.g. "unloading on her so she looks like a melted candle," carpet munching, taking it up the ol' wazoo, porno penises, and so on. The main characters are Boomer age, living in a small town with not too many opportunities for fulfillment, much less greatness. But they don't need great, they have one another and a solid conviction their de facto leader Andy Sargentee will come up with an idea one day that will get them out of their rut.

Still our kindly collection of town eccentrics worries when they find him in the local hideaway nursing a beer, at a table by himself, seeing no one around him, obviously in deep thought. He's done this several times before, and usually his brilliant notion gets him fired or causes everyone more grief than necessary. One by one, these town eccentrics are described by the narrator's voiceover or through conversation of others at the bar.

It's quite a cast of characters, from which Andy will be pulling (sorry) to do the production: There's the barfly Otis, who only really wants to be the guy that every movie has on the set to stand around and pretty much do nothing. Moose (Ted Danson), who everyone knows is gay, puts on airs about how many women he has and what he'd like to do with them; he later winds up volunteering to do a key sex scene... to less than desirable effect. Barney Macklehatton (Tim Blake Nelson) is infatuated with honkytonk angel Helen (Glenne Headly) who won't have anything to do with him; Barney, who's generally respected around town, becomes the coproducer with Andy... as well as his straight man. And Some Idiot (Joe Pantoliano)—a nickname deriving from someone's comment about his stubborn persistence in community college classes—becomes the writer/director (he's the only one who's ever taken a film class). Finally, the local video store clerk, Emmett (Patrick Fugit) agrees to work the camera.

A note from the IMDb page: Most of the characters have names that were used in the old Andy Griffith Show.

The production eventually gets under way, with one humorous incident after another. I particularly liked the scene where the three black actors they hire to do a porn-industry staple, on the basis of the assumption that all black men are endowed like stallions, are found to be lacking when the towels drop. There's a followup meeting between Andy and Homer (Isaiah Washington) in which Andy doesn't feel he should have to pay the actors and Homer is threatening to claim discrimination for this demeaning stereotyping. Genuinely funny.

None of these established actors in *The Amateurs* disappoints, particularly Joe Pantoliano as *Some Idiot* and William Fichtner as *Otis*. The movie even wanders into conventional rebound love story territory, as Andy initially approaches Peggy (Lauren Graham) to play in the movie but finds he cannot get himself to make the offer... instead he asks her out. And even the Barney and Helen story moves on from her early rejection of him.

A noted critic I read tended to disparage the writing, directing, and cinematography, but as an ordinary viewer I don't think most of you will find anything awry in the presentation. It's a satire; if anything I think the writing is more promising than the directing. The concept of the movie is made for a real America that longs for a better way.

All good clean fun, though not your mother's Oldsmobile.

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