

# 'Obvious Child' rom-com with a message

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Jim Dixon  
Fanboys Examiner  
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Obvious Child (movie)

Rating:

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“Obvious Child” opens with its main character, a standup comedienne played by Jenny Slate, doing her act at a small New York club. It revolves mainly around her vagina and soiled panties, and it isn’t funny. We’re supposed to think it is, because if we don’t, we aren’t hip enough to get this feminist, indie comedy about an immature twentysomething who gets pregnant as the result of a drunken one

night stand and decides to have an abortion. Max (Jake Lacey), the nice, young, painfully bland man who impregnated her, wants to see her again, and has no idea she’s pregnant.

This is anything but traditional territory for a rom-com, but “Obvious Child” is at its strongest when it takes the “that’s our story and we’re sticking to it” approach to it. Can a couple make a relationship work with an aborted pregnancy following their first date? You could have an interesting story there. “Obvious Child” only spends about half its brief screen time on the part of the movie that wants to be a story. Pretty much equal time is given to an obvious political tract, and that’s when it starts getting obnoxious.

Director/cowriter Gillian Robespierre isn’t content to simply make an off-the-beaten path

romantic comedy, and that's a problem, because she's only doing a so-so job at that. There's no appreciable chemistry between the clean-cut Lacey and the earthy, snarky Slate, to begin with, which makes it a little difficult to figure out why he'd put up with her abuse. Second, the story starts late. Donna has to get dumped by her boyfriend and find out she's losing her day job before her drunken hook-up. Did we need to give her an excuse to get drunk?

The audience wouldn't have had a lot of problem with this, to be honest. It just underscores the fact that this is a clumsy script and an awkwardly directed movie that expects to get cut slack because it's an indie. It also treats its political agenda like it doesn't have a political agenda, a tactic that actually underscores the moral of the story with the subtlety of whacking the audience upside its collective head with a Louisville Slugger. It's isn't the fact that "Obvious Child" has a political agenda that's the problem—it's the fact that that agenda overwhelms the story. Even viewers on the fence about the abortion issue are likely to agree that Slate's Donna is not emotionally equipped to be a parent. They might wonder that there's no deliberation depicted at all here, and when she makes jokes about it during her comedy routine, she and the filmmakers really do risk losing the audience.

The screenplay also attempts to convince us that Donna's mother, played by the 57 year old Polly Draper, had an illegal abortion while in college in the sixties. Arithmetic helps. The actress would have been 14 in 1969. Even assuming she's playing substantially older, the character would need to be close to 70 and no one's buying that. The only reason reference is made to an illegal abortion is to demonstrate to the audience how much more dangerous and emotionally difficult this was on women seeking abortions. They didn't need to gild the lily. They're already preaching to the choir. The pro-life crowd wasn't going to this movie anyway.

It isn't even like this is the first movie to deal with the abortion issue. "Fast Times at Ridgemont High," made back in the eighties, had an abortion subplot, and it barely made a ripple on the cultural duck pond. "The Cider House Rules" and "Dirty Dancing" also came first. Let's not forget that an episode of "Maude," back in the seventies, dealt with abortion in the marriage of its mature, middle class main characters back in the seventies.

Every woman in the movie has apparently had an abortion at some point. Are we to regard this as a rite of passage? That would indeed seem depraved. You aren't ready to have a baby unless you've terminated a pregnancy? The idea that someone might actually opt to have a baby is treated as a dismissive afterthought.

Framing all this material is a litany of clichés, from the gay best friend to the cynical roommate (Gaby Hoffman) to the socially inept horndog (David Cross) and doting dad (Richard Kind), all whom come straight from central casting. Stereotypes are endemic to propaganda pieces, and their presence here does nothing to convince this isn't primarily a tract. "Obvious Child" runs a mere 85 minutes, which is barely long enough to qualify as a feature. But believe me. You aren't going to wish it was longer.

It hardly bears mentioning that the technical aspects of the movie are unremarkable, other than the annoying tendency common to modern indies to but between identical camera shots where only the action has changed. The cinematography is self-consciously drab. Nothing will be lost by waiting for Red Box.

“**Obvious Child**” is now showing at **The Spectrum 7 on Delaware Avenue in Albany.**