REVIEW: 'How Do You Know' when it isn't funny?

David James, (c) Columbia Pictures 2010.

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'How Do You Know'

Rating:

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The funny parts of "How Do You Know" are all in the trailer. The rest of the movie's 116 minute running time is pretty much made up of talk, and as Hitchcock once, said, "Pictures of actors talking is not my idea of cinema."

"How Do You Know" is an endlessly talky, meandering exercise in directorial self-indulgence. The cast, including Reese Witherspoon as Lisa, a veteran Olympic softball player who's just been cut from the team, Owen Wilson as Matty, a self-absorbed, major leaguer at the top his game, Paul Rudd, as George, a nebbishy and neurotic executive played by the very good-looking Paul Rudd, who is about to indicted for some nebulous white collar crime, and Jack Nicholson as his Machiavellian father, are all good. (The big name cast is also why this movie, without expensive action sequences or special effects, managed to cost a reported $120 million.) But their writer/director seems to never have a handle on the tone or the plot, for that matter. The story shifts its focus between the three major characters regularly, but the intervals are so long the viewer is likely to forget the others are in it. This type

of shifting point of view is easy to do in a novel, harder in a film. Novels run hundreds of pages. Screenplays are long at 110.

One suspects the script here may have been massive, and that dozens of pages worth of material were shot but ended up on the cutting room floor. (One of a group of lawyers, out-of-focus behind Jack Nicholson, appears to be Daniel Benzali, who does not appear otherwise in the movie.) A subplot about George's pregnant assistant (Kathryn Hahn) periodically raises its head only to disappear for half an hour and then reappear. We don't know whether or not it's important until far too late in the game. Life may not have apparent structure but movies are supposed to. The appeal of film and theater is partly in giving structure and pattern to the formlessness of reality. Supporting characters support--they're not supposed to hold the movie hostage in the final reel.

As always, Brooks is obsessed to a fault with making his characters three-dimensional. Everyone has flaws and the worst sinners have redeeming virtues. Sometimes this backfires, forcing sympathy where we don't want it. Someone isn't going to get the girl and we don't *want* to feel bad for him.

The director of photography is Janusz Kaminski, moonlighting from his full-time day job of photographing Steven Spielberg's movies for the past decade or so. This actually doesn't look much like his work on some of the Spielberg movies he's shot, with their muted color ("Schindler's List" was actually shot in black and white). "How Do You Know" features bright and deep colors. This movie is meant to look pretty, although Brooks has structured a large of number of scenes as series of disconcerting close-ups, maybe in contemplation of the DVD release. Close-ups, routinely used on TV, easily become intrusive, almost pornographic on a theater screen.

This is also one of those movies where you get the feeling that the people making it have been in Hollywood so long they honestly don't know much about anything else. We're told Matty makes $14 million a year as relief pitcher with a 94 mph fastball...? Okay, he's not a closer and he does play for the Nationals, but still... The only scene of Matty at a game is supposed to be at home but doesn't look much Nationals Park and there are no big crowd shots. The scene was almost certainly shot at a minor league stadium and it looks it.

It's certainly a bad sign when one is distracted by the continuity errors in Paul Rudd's tie during

the climactic scene, but it certainly helps answer the question "How do you know when it isn't funny." That and all the jokes being in the trailer, I guess.