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MOVIE REVIEW | 'THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT'

The Kids Are All Right (2010)

NYT Critics' Pick



Suzanne Tenner/Focus Features

Annette Bening and Julianne Moore in "The Kids Are All Right."

Meet the Sperm Donor: Modern Family Ties

By A. O. SCOTT

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I'm tempted to start this review by falling back on a tried-and-true movie critic formulation and saying something like "Lisa Cholodenko's 'Kids Are All Right' is the best comedy about an American family since ..." Since what? Precedents and grounds for comparison seem to be lacking, so I may have to let the superlative stand unqualified for now.

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Which is fine: Ms. Cholodenko's film, which she wrote with Stuart Blumberg, is so canny in its insights and so agile in its negotiation of complex emotions that it deserves to stand on its own. It is outrageously funny without ever exaggerating for comic effect, and heartbreaking with only minimal melodramatic embellishment.

But its originality — the thrilling, vertiginous sense of never having seen anything quite like it before — also arises from the particular circumstances of the family at its heart. There is undeniable novelty to a movie about a lesbian couple whose two teenage children were conceived with the help of an anonymous sperm donor. Families like this are hardly uncommon in the real world, but Ms. Cholodenko ("Laurel Canyon," "High Art") and Mr. Blumberg have

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Suzanne Tenner/Focus Features

From left, Josh Hutcherson, Mia Wasikowska and Mark Ruffalo in "The Kids Are All Right."

The New York Times

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A Place Like Home

Lisa Cholodenko, the director of "The Kids Are All Right," narrates a look at her film.

discovered in this very modern arrangement a way of refreshing the ancient and durable wellsprings of comedy.

"The Kids Are All Right" starts from the premise that gay marriage, an issue of ideological contention and cultural strife, is also an established social fact. Nic and Jules, a couple with two children, a Volvo and a tidy, spacious house in a pleasant suburban stretch of Southern California, are a picture of normalcy.

Which is to say that they are loving, devoted, responsible and a bit of a mess. Some of this is midlife malaise: not quite a crisis, at least not at first. Nic ([Annette Bening](#)), an OB-GYN, is the breadwinner and principal worrier. Jules ([Julianne Moore](#)), who has dabbled in various careers while taking care of the children, is restless and maybe just a little flaky. They are comfortable with each other, more or less content, but also frustrated, confused, a bit out of sorts. As I said: normal.

It is almost impossible to find the right shorthand for these women. Their speech patterns and habits certainly seem familiar. The screenwriters' ear for the way therapeutic catchphrases and hazy insights recalled from college reading lists filter into everyday conversation is as unerring as Ms. Moore's offbeat comic timing or Ms. Bening's tactical use of silence. But though they are recognizable, Nic and Jules are hardly predictable; they are not types, but people, and the acid of satire is applied to them sparingly and sensitively enough to avoid corroding the essential empathy that grounds the movie.

Of course, in every family empathy has its limits. Nic and Jules don't always communicate very well, and their

children — the 18-year-old Joni (Mia Wasikowska) and her 15-year-old brother, Laser (Josh Hutcherson) — have reached the stage when parents seem like alien, irrational and outmoded beings. Your parents are supposed to understand you (not that they ever can), while you have no choice but to tolerate them.

Joni, about to leave for college, is trying to figure out the terms of her fast-approaching independence, while Laser follows along behind his best friend, a bullying goofball named Clay (Eddie Hassell). Laser's wide-eyed fascination at the sight of Clay rough-housing with his father registers curiosity and barely articulated longing. What would it be like to have a dad? To help him find out — and to shut him up — Laser's skeptical, kindhearted sister tracks down the sperm donor, who turns out to be a restaurant owner and organic farmer named Paul.

The shorthand description of Paul is that he is played by [Mark Ruffalo](#), with specific reference to the goodnatured, feckless brother Mr. Ruffalo played in "[You Can Count on Me](#)." Paul is sort of like a cleaned-up, more self-confident version of that guy, with the same hesitant intonation, crooked smile (behind a graying goatee) and slightly dangerous charm. When Joni calls him, Paul, a good sport and a bit of an adventurer, gamely accepts her invitation to meet the family ("I love lesbians!"), and his relaxed manner smoothes over an awkward initial meeting.

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Much more awkwardness will follow, along with some real emotional peril. Nic and Jules are not won over at first — “a bit full of himself” is their not inaccurate verdict — but he manages to connect with both Joni and Laser in ways that their moms can’t. His position as a sympathetic outsider grants him insights that the family members lack, and in turn Joni, Laser and Jules come to see him as a confidant and counselor, a special kind of friend.

But nothing is more disruptive to domestic order than an unattached heterosexual man. In mid-19th-century America, anxiety about guys more or less like Paul drove movements for social and religious reform, and Ms. Cholodenko suggests that those advocates of temperance and other remedies may have had a point. Not that Paul, an effortless seducer (of at least one co-worker and at least one lesbian mom), is exactly the villain of the movie. He starts out too good to be true and winds up causing a lot of trouble, but at the end he’s more scapegoat than demon, and the filmmakers forgive him even if the other characters cannot.

Along the way, Ms. Cholodenko somehow blends the anarchic energy of farce — fueled by coincidences and reversals, collisions and misunderstandings — with a novelistic sensitivity to the almost invisible threads that bind and entangle people. The performances are all close to perfect, which is to say that the imperfections of each character are precisely measured and honestly presented.

There is great music too, both on the soundtrack and, in one extraordinary scene, sung a cappella at the dinner table. (It’s [Joni Mitchell’s “Blue.”](#) beautifully harmonized by Nic and Paul). The title is a musical reference, of course, to a song by the Who, a good choice for all kinds of reasons. Another one might have been the name of [a lovely ballad of enduring love](#) recorded a few years ago by [Emmylou Harris](#) and [Mark Knopfler](#): “This Is Us.”

“The Kids are All Right” is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). There’s sex, kids.

THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT

Opens on Friday nationwide.

Directed by [Lisa Cholodenko](#); written by Ms. Cholodenko and Stuart Blumberg; director of photography, Igor Jadue-Lillo; edited by Jeffrey M. Werner; music by [Carter Burwell](#); production designer, Julie Berghoff; costumes by Mary Claire Hannan; produced by Gary Gilbert, Jeffrey Levy-Hinte, Celine Rattray, Jordan Horowitz, Daniela Taplin Lundberg and Philippe Hellmann; released by Focus Features. Running time: 1 hour 45 minutes.

WITH: [Julianne Moore](#) (Jules), [Annette Bening](#) (Nic), [Mark Ruffalo](#) (Paul), Mia Wasikowska (Joni), Josh Hutcherson (Laser), Eddie Hassell (Clay) and Yaya DaCosta (Tanya).

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