

Babes revives the adult comedy

It recalls the raunchy movies of the early 2000s—even as it offers a fresh vision of what it means to grow up.

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Michelle Buteau (left) and Ilana Glazer (right) in *Babes* (Neon)

When *No Hard Feelings* (directed by Gene Stupnitsky) hit theaters in June 2023, critics hailed the return of the adult comedy, which had reigned supreme in American movie making in the early 2000s but since then had atrophied almost out of existence. As an erstwhile connoisseur of the genre, I was ready for a hilarious, mildly inappropriate romp with Jennifer Lawrence to kick off my summer. When I was

disappointed—it was a solid C+ movie, but not a resounding success—I worried I had outgrown the genre. In fact it is simply recalibrating for our current moment—something I realized as *Babes* (directed by Pamela Adlon) launched my summer this year. And I am ready for more.

An adult comedy could just mean any R-rated movie played primarily for laughs, something a little too raunchy or profane for family movie night. When I think of the genre, though, I have in mind comedies about the particular absurdities and perils of adulting. Whether it is Vince Vaughn trying to recapture his lost youth in *Old School* or Steve Carrell wrestling with his insecurities in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, the typical adult comedy has been one in which the trappings of heterosexual, middle-class adulthood—marriage, stable jobs, mortgages, kids—are both lampooned and eventually reaffirmed.

Babes already breaks new territory by making parenthood, rather than romance, the primary marker of adulthood. It is being marketed as a raunchy pregnancy comedy, and there are plenty of gags related to the embodied realities of pregnancy and birth. But its plotline and comedic beats are classic adult comedy. Eden (Ilana Glazer) and Dawn (Michelle Buteau) have been best friends for more than two decades, but their friendship is hitting its first major challenges now that Dawn has had her second kid and moved to a fancier part of Manhattan, leaving Eden behind teaching yoga in her fourth-floor walkup in Queens. When Eden accidentally gets pregnant during a one-night stand, she decides to join Dawn in the brave new land of parenthood.

Eden has resolutely resisted the trappings of adulthood. She parties hard, has an endearing relationship with the people who run her monthly STD testing clinic, and approaches life as a series of experiences to be seized and savored. Dawn's life, four train rides away and full of childcare schedules and home repairs, might as well be a foreign country. Dawn inhabits this life like a homesick expat determined to make the best of it. She has a wonderful and supportive husband, a career she likes, a house, two kids—and she is perpetually exhausted and grumpy. It is a depressing picture of adult success. As her husband says when they finally confess their mutually exhausted unhappiness: “Best-case scenario, I work my entire life and die when the kids are happy and healthy. That's the pinnacle—death followed by minor relief.”

Eden is a lot to handle. She decides her birth needs a theme (prom!), and she approaches the grosser realities of pregnancy as if she is the first person who has ever experienced them. Dawn is often roped into caring for her like one more child in need of parenting. But she also depends on Eden as a ticket out of the stultifying trap of adulthood she has diligently constructed. The movie is strongest when we go deep into the private language and unwavering trust they have built in their long friendship. It could do more to flesh out the intricacies of this friendship and the depth of each woman. I found myself wishing for a couple fewer vagina jokes and a little more character exposition.

Still, watching *Babes* felt like a throwback to the adult comedies of my own early adulthood. One of the first generations to face substantial rates of divorce among their parents, these Gen-X filmmakers were working through a generational response to their own vexed ideas of adulthood. They are clearly wary of the nuclear-family fantasy that failed their parents, but their characters are floundering in unmoored freedom, desperate for a narrative of growing up that can give stability and meaning to their lives. Most of these movies are about a whole generation of young adults (mostly, but not exclusively, young men) who are terrified of adulthood, only to discover a whole range of wondrous possibilities—friendship, commitment, emotional growth—waiting on the other side once they finally take the plunge.

I have been rewatching some of these early-2000s adult comedies with my teenager, and I have been disappointed to find that their vision of adulthood doesn't quite match my mood. Maybe I only found these movies hilarious and refreshing in my 20s because my stage of life often overlapped with the protagonists. Maybe the jokes just won't land as I move into middle age. Watching *Babes* I realized that so much of the comedy in these earlier movies only worked because the trappings of stable adulthood are never in question. If a character can't pay their rent or is falling into debt or doesn't have health insurance, it is because they don't want to grow up. Once they get serious, jobs, mortgages, and meaningful love are just waiting for the taking.

None of the signs of mature and meaningful adulthood hold much significance in *Babes*. Dawn is drowning under the middle-class dream, and Eden could never afford it to begin with. Instead, they must wrest a new vision of mature and meaningful adulthood out of the chaos of their lives through their friendship. The movie isn't a perfect embodiment of its ideals; it wraps up a little too neatly and

rushes over some of its more serious points to land its jokes. But it does offer us a new vision of growing up, one that rejects the dichotomy between serious adulthood and the joy of friendship—one in which there might be existence beyond exhaustion. This is something to take very seriously.