

Screen Savor Movie Review: Step Brothers

Opening July 25
Various theaters

By Kimberly Gadette
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Will Ferrell & John C. Reilly

Step Brothers

Directed by: Adam McKay

Screenplay by: Will Ferrell & Adam McKay

Story by: Will Ferrell & Adam McKay & John C. Reilly

Cast: Will Ferrell, John C. Reilly, Mary Steenburgen, Richard Jenkins, Adam Scott, Kathryn Hahn

Rating: R

Running Time: 98 minutes

Some successful careers in the entertainment industry defy explanation. Rosie O'Donnell. Pauly Shore. Steven Seagal. Roseanne Barr. Carrot Top. Pia Zadora. But their varied splashes are drab drops in the bucket as compared to the torrential onslaught of inferior, witless films that masquerade as comedies, starring the luckiest man working in Hollywood today — one Will Ferrell.

Thank God he doesn't have a step brother.

Unfortunately for us, his 39-year-old character does. Not only do we have to contend with Ferrell's Brennan Huff, unemployed and living at home with his mommy (Mary Steenburgen), but his new step brother Dale (John C. Reilly), another middle-aged man, also unemployed, living with his daddy (Richard Jenkins). In this five-minute *SNL* sketch passing as a feature, when the mommy and the daddy get together, the two man-children suddenly have to share living quarters. Waaaaah! The Brothers Grimm vehemently hate each other. Yet neither of them is man enough to commit step-fratricide or suicide. Instead, we're all forced to carry on.

It's not just that the movie is tedious beyond belief, overflowing with assorted scatological, genital and sex jokes that fall flat. The filmmakers (co-writer Ferrell, co-writer/director Adam McKay) haven't figured out the men's emotional ages. Sometimes they model as three-to-five year olds, crying hysterically at the dinner table, their feelings wounded at every insult from the other one. Perhaps they're mentally slow, poor dears, and we shouldn't judge. But then, presto change-o, they're more like pre-teens, fencing with swords, sharing night vision goggles, pouring over old *Playboy* magazines. But wait — did one of them just mention needing to do a little "R&D" (research and development) for a potential, saleable product? Wait, switch back, now they're dumb and dumber, afraid of the ten-year-old bullies on the playground who resoundingly whip their feeble behinds, making them ingest dry white dog feces. And then, smart and smarter, successfully turning would-be buyers away from their home by donning Nazi and Ku Klux Klan costumes.

Warning: This film could cause whiplash.

Reilly's Dale echoes Ferrell's Brennan, both of them spoiled, nasty and completely unlikable. (Unlikable protagonists? There's a big whoops.) Yet unlike Ferrell, Reilly's a highly-talented actor who deserves strong vehicles in which to showcase his talent. In 2003 alone, he starred in three films that were all Best Picture contenders. Here's an idea: Maybe John C.'s parents should put their feet down and separate him from the likes of Ferrell and McKay, making him hang out with the smarter kids until he figures it out for himself. Reilly, you're grounded. Just a thought.

Back to the underachievers: McKay's slack job as co-writer is matched by his lack of directorial talent, making veteran actors Steenburgen and Jenkins look like rank amateurs. An early scene in the bedroom between husband and wife depicts them speaking to each other in matter-of-fact, conversational tones. No touching, flirting, giggling — yet these two are brand new to their marriage bed. Furthermore, Jenkins is as changeable as the sons, portraying a stern, responsible doctor one minute, then throwing a tantrum the next.

And though this reviewer is usually loathe to point out actors' physical flaws, it is distracting to see Steenburgen's face painted an unholy hue of neon orange. Adding to her apri-copper glow are two black slashes over her eyes, meant to signify eyebrows. Plain and simple, she's *Pumpkinhead*. Given the horror of this grotesquely unfunny film, only in retrospect does that make any sense.

A nod to Kathryn Hahn as the predatory sister-in-law. Her first scene, in which she grits her teeth while her husband forces the family to sing four-part harmony, shows promise. Her silent suffering is funny. Too bad that she's then demoted to rendering a shallow performance in that Judd Apatow-ian fantastical world, in which the hottie always falls for the jobless loser.

This film has been touted as the grown-up version of *Superbad*. The comparison is ridiculous — that prior film was excellent, while this one simply provides the means to slap on a label. "Super bad," as applied to *Step Brothers*, is a super understatement.

Our two cents: Two witless stepbrothers make for an irredeemable double negative.