

Ahh, the joys of parenting

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★ ★ ★ ★ *Parenthood*
Royal Park

Ron Howard's movies have always suffered from a flabby sentimentality. The bad ones (*Willow*, *Gung Ho*) aren't even worth mentioning and the good ones (*Splash*, *Cocoon*) are far too good-natured to qualify as anything other than light entertainment.

Parenthood is something entirely different. A deft ensemble comedy about the travails of parenting, it juggles a sprawling cast and countless storylines with intelligence and wit. Sweet touching moments occur, but they are invariably followed by biting, sarcastic humor.

The result is a sharp, funny and insightful movie that is believable and moving enough to earn its heartwarming ending.

Steve Martin stars as Gil, a business executive with a wife, three children, two parents, one grandmother, numerous siblings, relatives and a stalled career. He's good at his job but great at being a parent; Gil is funny, loving, supportive and says all the right things.

One of the revealing aspects of the movie is Gil's son, Kevin. Kevin is a nice, smart little boy who becomes extremely tense over every-day occurrences and frequently bursts into tears. Gil and his wife Karen (Mary Steenburgen) come to the realization that, despite their nurturing and care, Kevin needs to see a therapist.

In a welcome departure from the *Father Knows Best* attitude,

Parenthood knows that being a great parent doesn't mean you produce picture-perfect, problem-free children.

That certainly is true for Gil's sister, Helen (Diane Wiest). Helen's husband dumped her years ago, leaving her to raise two children, Julie (Martha Plimpton) and Garry (Leaf Phoenix).

Julie is frittering away her chance to attend college because of an infatuation with "that Tod" (Keanu Reeves). Garry is a moody little boy who comes and goes as he pleases.

"Garry? Where are you going?" Helen asks. "Out," he says, slamming the door behind him.

This doesn't even begin to describe all the action taking place. Nathan (Rick Moranis) is raising his three year old daughter on Kafka and karate, trying to turn her into a super-kid. Frank (Jason Robards), Gil's father, is a gruff old bastard enamored with the exploits of the family black sheep, Larry (Tom Hulce).

All of this simply whizzes by, sparked with energy and flashes of recognition. Beautifully acted and performed, *Parenthood* isn't just entertaining; it's accurate.

It ends, appropriately, with the birth of another child. The entire clan gathers in the hospital for the event and Howard creates his boldest stroke -- a long montage of interplay among the family members that is breathtaking in its warmth and sweetness. Out of the blue, Howard has delivered one of the best movies of the year.

by michael giltz