In a summer full of sequels and retreads so far, Mitch thinks he make have found a hidden gem at the theaters this past week in "Knocked Up" ... a film directed by the same guy that did the screamingly hysterical "The 40 Year Old Virgin". While the plot line is simple, Mitch applauds the writing and directing, as well as the acting and chemistry between the main characters in the film. Up next for Mitch? Oceans 13.

In a summer full of sequels and retreads, there is finally an original movie worth spending money to see at the theatre. Director/producer/writer Judd Apatow makes it two-for-two, following up his crude, lewd, and charmingly sweet “The 40 Year Old Virgin” with the crude, lewd, and charmingly sweet “Knocked Up”.

The plot line is fairly simple. Workaholic knockout Alison Scott (Katherine Heigl) has just received a promotion at E! television from production assistant to on-camera reporter. To celebrate, she goes out with her sister (Leslie Mann…aka Mrs. Judd Apatow) to a local hot spot where she parties too hard, and ends up back at her place with slacker Ben Stone (Seth Rogen). Eight weeks later, she’s throwing up in the morning, and after going through two gallons of water needed to test herself at least fifteen times, she finds herself calling Ben for the first time since the one-night stand to give him the news of the upcoming bundle of joy.

Sounds like standard Fox level sitcom stuff, right? But what makes it all work is

in Apatow's skill as a writer and director, and the chemistry amongst the actors. It's a look at two entirely different worlds, and how a member from each must evolve. Mostly this would refer to Ben, a young man totally content to remain unemployed, uncommitted, and stoned.

Like any good comedy of this genre, it's the friends that orbit the two main characters that make or break a movie. Ben lives with four other ambition-challenged friends, all of whom share Ben's love of pot, porn, and pop culture. They spend a lot of their days working on their "project", a web site dedicated to detailing on-screen nudity in mainstream movies…the movie name, the actress unclothed, the level of nudity, and how far into the film, for those who just want to get to the good parts. This obviously takes a lot of research for the guys, but they aren't the brainless dorks you would expect (except when they are stoned, in which cases they are all really stupid). In fact, they can spout off a lot of references from some high-brow movies, including making a comment about how "Munich" is one of the best Jewish films of all time because it shows Jews fighting back (four of the five friends are Jewish).

On the other side, Alison lives in the guest house of her sister Debbie and brother-in-law Peter (Paul Rudd), a record executive, and their two young girls. Debbie is just as high strung as her sister, but with the two small girls, she doesn't have an outlet, which leads to a lot of the stress and comedy between her and her husband, whose laid back style is the polar opposite of Debbie's.

Out of this background Ben and Alison decide to try to make it all work out, and gradually come to love each other, despite the fact that Alison is model-level gorgeous, and Ben is overweight, frumpy, shorter than her, and has no means of supporting himself…other than the obvious pot selling that these guys probably do to allow them some spending money for night clubs (that wasn't really detailed in the movie, but it seemed pretty obvious to me). During the course of the pregnancy you get the expected doctors' visits, hormonal imbalance induced rages, and culture clashes that you'd see in any comedy concerning a

pregnancy.

Apatow makes it different, though. Both characters are decent human beings that you can readily root for…they just need to grow up. Ben is completely lovable. He endears himself to the prickly Debbie, and especially to Peter, a man in desperate need for a small dose of male camaraderie injected into his estrogen dominated world. In the same vein, Alison is able to spend time with Ben and his friends without once acting superior. Quite the contrary, as Ben finally learns to accept responsibility, Alison expands in ways not related to her stomach size. In one especially funny scene, she's watching a movie, and stops it to call out to Ben that a nude scene is happening so that he can document it. Ben probably felt the same pride as I did when my wife was calling for LeBron to dump a pass down low so that Z could take an advantage of a mis-match the other day (non-Cavalier fans can just ignore that last reference).

And while I can complain about the improbability of these two types hooking up, I cannot find any fault in how the emotions are displayed on-screen. The fears, concerns, and doubts come across as honest and believable. Peter and Debbie obviously love each other and are right for each other, but there are so many other distractions and obligations going on in their lives that they are simply tired and depressed, and they can take it out their frustrations on each other with zingers that will make you wince at the vindictiveness, but nod in sympathy if you've been married for more than a few years, knowing that this is how married life sometimes is. In one heartbreaking scene, Debbie thinks Peter is cheating on her, so they follow him to a strange house…where he is involved in a fantasy baseball draft. Debbie confronts Peter about the lie he used to get out of the house, and Peter responds that he just needs time for himself to do things like going to the movies and watching Spider-Man 3. "But I'd like to go see Spider-Man', Debbie cries, voicing the dissatisfaction with life that she also shares with her husband, but cannot seem to figure out how to resolve.

That is the best part about this movie…it is so brutally, honestly funny about life

and relationships. No one is the “good guy”. No one is the “bad guy”. It’s just about life, and the people you meet on the way. And some of the people they meet were hilarious in small roles, especially Harold Ramis as Ben’s father, Alan Tudyk and SNL regular Kristen Wiig as high strung E! executives and Ryan Seacrest (what?) doing a hysterical sendup of himself on E!, as he’s supposed to be dealing with waiting for Jessica Simpson to arrive for an interview.

Now is it the “instant classic” that some critics are crowing about? I don’t think so. As good as Heigl and Rogen were as actors, I never really bought into them as a couple, not just from the mismatch, but also because Apatow jumped too quickly from her callously brushing him off the morning after the one-night stand to her falling in love with him after just a couple of weeks of him accompanying her to baby stores and OB/GYN appointments. Also, the casual drug use was to a level I haven’t seen since Cheech and Chong were in their heydays, and the crudeness was pushed too far just for shock value a few times…the description about how guys got pink eye due to another’s flatulence was more than I needed to know.

But those are minor quibbles. This movie is the exact opposite of everything else we will be seeing this summer. No “Big Blockbuster: Part X” with big budget stars, big budget special effects, thunderous explosions, and bombastic promotions. Just real people dealing with real life in a realistic (relatively) way. A completely original and entertaining movie.

My rating – Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs).