When I got with Mitch and talked about his series of movie reviews on the Best Picture contenders, he insisted I run the review for "Juno" last because he had such a strong opinion about this film. The plot line? Faced with an unplanned pregnancy, an offbeat young woman makes an unusual decision regarding her unborn child. Not much was expected of this indie film when it was released, but it went on to gross $125 million (and counting), garnering four Oscar nominations while ending up on pretty much everyone's Top 10 list of 2007. And Mitch reviews it for us.

This was not supposed to happen.

An indie film authored by a first time screenwriter who was previously known only for a book written about her experiences as a stripper. A 30 year old director with only one notable credit to his name...a name much more closely associated with a famous father. And a cast of mostly character actors, headlined by a tiny wisp of a Canadian firecracker whom most of the public only knew as the girl who walked through walls in "X-Men 3".

And THIS movie goes on to gross $125 million (and counting), garnering four Oscar nominations while ending up on pretty much everyone's Top 10 list of 2007?

Yep.

And the reason is simple; this is a wonderful movie, one that you can watch again and again and still enjoy the fact that it hits almost every single note perfectly.

Jason Reitman has taken Dioblo Cody's smart, touching, funny script, put together an ensemble of actors working in flawless harmony, led by Ellen Page in the title role, and has turned out the best comedy I have seen since "Almost Famous".

Some people have been wanting to compare it to "Knocked Up", since it involved an unexpected pregnancy, or "Superbad", since it features Michael Cera and involves high school, but it is so much different and better than those. To find comparisons, you'd need to look more at films like "Sideways", "Lost In Translation", or "High Fidelity"; comedies that aren't going for belly laughs and outlandish escapades, but more for warm chuckles of appreciation of life's little absurdities, combined with smiles of appreciation of tales of relationships well told.

As the film opens, the offbeat 16 year old Juno MacGuff is walking around the neighborhood, continually drinking out of an oversized bottle of Sunny D. Why? Because she's wanting to take a third at-home pregnancy test, hoping that this time the results will be more in her favor. After all, a girl isn't supposed to get pregnant after the very first time she's had sex, is she?

But life has a way of disproving the theories of the young, and indeed, Juno's decision to give into curiosity and have sex with her slightly geeky track star friend Paulie Bleeker (Cera) didn't exactly end up the way they planned. After a visit to an abortion clinic leaves her cold, she chooses to have the child...but isn't sure what to do with it. She's smart enough to realize that she's not mature enough or ready to raise it on her own, so she decides that adoption is the best way to go. Not wanting to "trust the system" her friend Leah points out an ad in the "Penny Saver" for a yuppie couple that may just fit the bill ("They have ‘Desperately Seeking Spawn' right next to the pet ads!")

That being decided, Juno has to face the dreaded task of telling her parents. Here is where this movie makes another unusual turn; in J.K. Simmons and Allison Janney as Juno's father and step-mother Mac and Bren, Reitman presents us with what may be the first ever intelligent, supportive, and loving parents in the history of teen movies. Are they happy about her announcement? Of course not (Mac: "Did you see that coming"? Bren, "Yeah...but I was hoping she was expelled, or into hard drugs." Mac: "That was my first instinct too. Or a DUI...anything but this!"). But they accept things without going into sitcom level histrionics, and stand by their daughter's decision to give the child up.

Mac even accompanies Juno to meet the prospective new parents, a very well cast Jason Bateman and Jennifer Garner as a well-to-do young couple living in a McMansion a few hours' drive away. Juno immediately takes a liking to Mark (Bateman), sensing a kindred spirit in the jingle writing musician who shares Juno's love of over-the-top slasher movies.

She's not quite as initially sold on Vanessa (Garner), who seems a bit too repressed and cold for her liking. But in a beautiful scene at the local mall when Juno sees Vanessa interacting with the young children of her friends, the final decision is set in motion in a touching moment of joy when Vanessa first feels the baby move inside of Juno.

The movie itself follows Juno all the way through her pregnancy, giving us a chance to see not only Juno's growth as a person, but time to understand that she's a lot deeper than the wise-cracking façade she presents to the world. There is a lot more to this pint-sized dynamo than just her being viewed as "the cautionary whale".

There is a lot more to all of the other characters as well. Bren is no stereotypical clueless or wicked step-mother. Juno's mother disappeared when she was five, and Bren has filled the role admirably...but that doesn't mean it's a peaches and cream relationship, either, as the two can snipe at each other with the best of

them. But watch out when someone crosses Bren's little girl, as a judgmental ultrasound tech finds out when she makes a disparaging remark about teen parents in front of Bren, who proceeds to put her in her place with one of the best little monologues you'll hear.

J.K. Simmons is the true glue holding everything together, though. He is the father every teenaged girl wished she had; loving and supportive without being overbearing, while possessing a dry sense of humor that he passed on to his child ("Thanks for having me and my irresponsible child over to your house.") In another one of countless scenes that you'll remember for a long time, Juno and Mac have a discussion about finding true love that rings more true than any "father-daughter" speech I've ever seen onscreen.

Garner and Bateman also show so much more acting ability than was seen in their last movie together, the pedestrian "The Kingdom" (or, "CSI: Riyadh"), exhibiting depth, soul, and painstaking honesty as a "perfect" couple who may not really be as perfect as everyone thinks, but are not put into the typical "bad person/good person" camps normally used in film.

As good as all of the actors were, it still falls upon Ellen Page's slight shoulders to carry the movie, and she delivers a performance that can stand up to any actress in any film this year. The best thing I can say about her acting is that it never rang untrue. Not a single time. Not when she's at her most vulnerable, either through physical pain of labor, or of heartbreak in seeing her guy with another girl. Not when she's trying to deal with all the stress in her young life while still trying to get an education. Not when she's making some of the best one-line remarks every uttered by a pregnant 16 year old. Yes, the lines are the credit of an extraordinary writer, but it's up to Page to deliver them in a believable fashion, and she is up to the task every single time.

A film like "Juno" does so much more for me than just make me laugh or make me think. I makes me appreciate what a wonderful art form the cinema

actually is. It is an absolute joy to watch, and even if it won't end up winning "Best Picture" in front of the somber and "serious" movies that make up the rest of the category, it is still the one I most want to see again...a movie for the brain and for the heart...and the best film of the year.

My Rating: Bernie Kosar (4 footballs)