The Oscar nominated film “The Kids Are All Right” plays like a feature film version of one of those quirky comedy/dramas you see all of the time on HBO or Showtime. This makes perfect sense when you learn that director Lisa Cholodenko has directed episodes of “Six Feet Under”, “The L Word”, and “Hung”. It’s all about family dynamics in these cable shows, a theme that Cholodenko exports to the big screen. It’s just a pretty big switch on the makeup of the family; a lesbian couple and their two teenage children.

Nic (Annette Bening), a doctor, and Jules (Julianne Moore), a free spirit still undecided as to what she wants to be when she grows up, have a loving relationship with each other and their two children. Each woman bore one of the children, using sperm from the same anonymous donor, so that they are at least biologically half-siblings. Joni (Mia Wasikowska) is a senior in high school, getting ready to be the first to leave the nest, while Laser (Josh Hutcherson) is 15, and dealing with all the “fun” of the early years of high school.

All in all, it is a very normal household, all things considered, and the kids are very well adjusted. Laser, however, is going through a period where having two mothers isn’t enough, and he seems to be needing some sort of male role model in his life. So he pressures his older sister into making a request from the sperm donation center regarding the identity of the sperm donor, which sets the entire movie in motion.

It turns out that the donor is OK with being contacted, and he makes arrangements to meet the two children he never knew existed. His name is Paul (Mark Ruffalo), and he is exactly the type of character one would expect to meet in Southern California. An organic food farmer and restaurant owner, Paul is the ultimate SoCal stereotypical denizen; super charming, laid back, mostly irresponsible, and a total hound dog with the ladies. The meeting with the kids goes well, despite some extreme awkwardness in it all. So well that Joni and Laser take it a step further, to the point that it ends up that Nic and Jules are aware of their children’s efforts to meet

him.

Having Paul come into the life of this perfect little family of course upsets the apple cart…as you might expect from any sitcom you've ever seen before.

But it's not all what you would predict it to be, and that's what elevates "The Kids Are All Right" to the level where it was considered worthy of its Oscar nomination.

It starts with Annette Bening in another marvelous performance for a woman who always seems to be the runner-up for a Best Actress win. Bening is one actress who has had no problem evolving from someone mostly known for her beauty in her 20s to a serious actress as she has gotten older. Nic is not a very sympathetic character. She has all of the personality flaws that you seem to find with doctors; pushy, obsessive, domineering, and intolerant of anyone disrupting her world and her position as the "head" of the family. All of these irritating traits makes it more moving when she finally shows the vulnerability behind the Super-Mom/Super-Doctor persona and reveals that she has more than her share of insecurities, doubts, and fears.

She is perfectly complimented by Julianne Moore as Jules, who is as aimless as Nic is focused. Jules has gladly accepted the role of "stay-at-home" mom while the kids were growing up, but now, just like any stay-at-home mother whose children no longer need her full time attention, she is pushing hard to establish her own identity and her own profession. Her goal is to be a landscaper, and Paul decides to hire her for her first major job; renovating the grounds of his bungalow overlooking his farm.

Moore is just as good as Bening in this role, even if it is a much less flashy part. Moore hits all the right notes for someone struggling with who they are; stung by what she sees as a Nic dismissing her efforts to grow as a person, and intrigued by the attention she is receiving from Paul.

As the third female in this group, Wasikowska lives up to her quickly growing reputation as an up and coming actress (she also starred in "Alice in Wonderland", and will next play the title role in the umpteenth remake of "Jane Eyre"). Joni likes having Paul in her life, and enjoys spending her last few months before moving off to college learning about him and his world. He

pushes her a bit to start asserting herself; a task that she takes to, much to the chagrin of Nic. But Joni is still fiercely protective of her mothers and her brother, and explodes at Paul when she feels he is doing something that would cause any of them pain.

In the face of these three strong women, I guess it's only to be expected that the male characters suffer. While I think that Mark Ruffalo does a very good acting job with his role, Paul's character just isn't that believable, or that well defined. Nor is the character of Laser. It's not that they're bad…they just pale compared to the women.

The bottom line of this film is that it is about family and the trials and tribulations any long term relationship endures over the years. The struggles Nic and Jules go through are no different than any other couple…it's just shown as something between two women instead of between a man and a woman.

Infidelity, loneliness, restlessness, fear of the unknown, sadness of a child leaving the nest, wanting to establish an identity as an individual…there is not a single issue Nic and Jules faced that you couldn't apply to any heterosexual couple, and to me, that's a major point of this movie. The drama often did seem to be at the same level as you see every week on episodic television. The difference was in the quality of the acting, and Bening, Moore, and Wasikowska's skills make "The Kids Are All Right" one of the better films of 2010.

My Rating – Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs).