



Amy Sedaris in *Strangers with Candy*

HOMECOMING QUEEN

Strangers with Candy

review by M. Faust

I don't know that anyone issued a call for a female Jim Carrey, but Amy Sedaris seems determined occupy that niche. As Jerri Blank, the 40ish hardcase at the center of this film adaptation of the Comedy Central series, she sports a set of buckteeth and holds her face in a perpetual grimace that suggests Carrey's Fire Marshall Bill from his *In Living Color* days. Sedaris seems wholly unencumbered by personal vanity: If a laugh can be gotten from her wide hips or pot belly, she's there in skin-tight sweat pants. It's rather a surprise to Google her and find that off screen she's a reasonably attractive woman: If the Oscar people were to institute a Lon Chaney award for Most Uncomfortable Performance, she'd be a lock.

But what seemed funny in small weekly doses on the home screen lands with a thud on the big one. Though it's touted as a prequel to the series, the film of *Strangers With Candy* gives no more backstory than viewers got in the introduction of each episode. For the uninitiated, Jerri is a 46-year-old ex-con who, after years in prison on drug and prostitution charges, returns to her hometown and enrolls in the high school she quit at the age of 15.

The series, devised by Sedaris and fellow Second City alumnae Stephen Colbert and Paul Dinello, wisely didn't take the premise too seriously, using it only as a device to satirize the preachy "After School Specials" made for overly impressionable teens in the 1970s and 1980s. But where a half-hour TV show can exhaust one gag and then reinvent itself next episode, a feature film is with you for three times that length.

Maybe the plot here (Jerri enters the school science fair in order to impress her father) was meant to be fatuously clichéd. But

if that's so, it's hard to tell where the real meat of the movie is supposed to be. There are some funny bits poking fun at teachers who couldn't care less about their students, particularly with Colbert as a history teacher whose ignorance is matched only by his sense of victimization at the hands of the world at large. (As he tells an ex-lover, with no trace of irony, "I need more out of this relationship than I'm willing to put into it.")

There are enough other Second City veterans on hand to allow for at least the possibility of parody, but they get short shrift to make room for a gaggle of celebrity cameos that do nothing but make you say, "Hey, there's Philip Seymour Hoffman!" or "Hey, there's what's-his-name, you know, Sarah Jessica Parker's husband."

But the biggest problem is at the movie's center. Jerri is so grotesque that we're curious about her past. We also expect to see her use the skills of a street criminal to get her through high school. But neither of those things happen. And while Jerri may be both selfish and stupid, she's more innocent than you would expect from a supposed career criminal. No one at school even seems to acknowledge that she's three times as old as the other students: The movie could just as well be about a transfer student for all the difference Jerri's age and history make to the story.

Strangers with Candy most resembles a mid-period John Waters movie, like *Polyester* or *Serial Mom*, lacking the bizarre empathy that Divine was able to coax out of us. I would say that it's not nearly as outrageous as it thinks it is, but I can't really believe that even the people who made this think it was outrageous.

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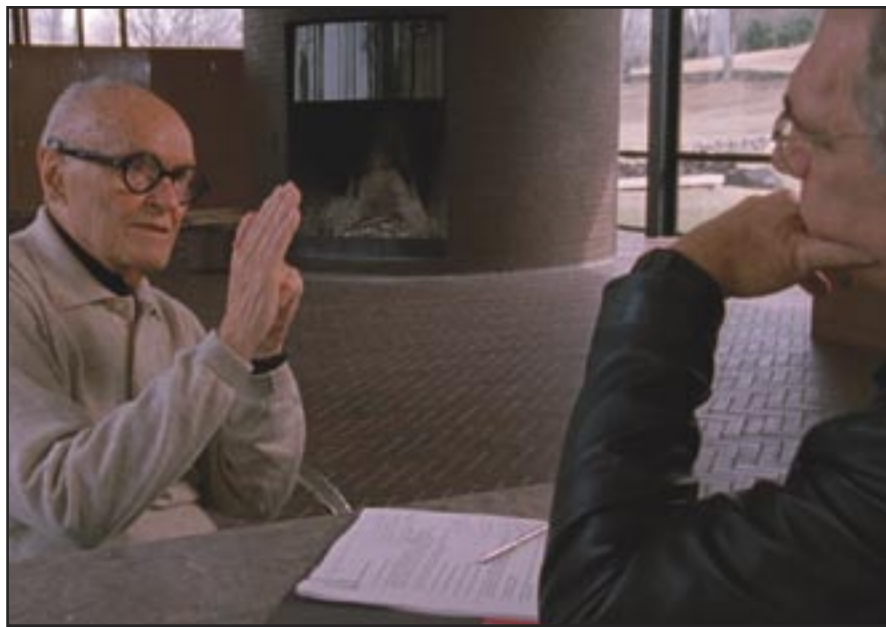
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Architect Phillip Johnson in *Sketches of Frank Gehry*

THE ARCHITECTURE OF EGO

Sketches of Frank Gehry

review by George Sax

"It wasn't just that I didn't know anything about documentaries," director Sydney Pollack (*Tootsie*, *The Firm*) says self-effacingly near the beginning of *Sketches of Frank Gehry*. "I didn't know anything about architecture."

On the first count, Pollack's skeptical modesty seems unwarranted. His carefully crafted portrait of the personality and work of the internationally renowned and pioneering California architect is consistently involving, both aesthetically and intellectually. His second reservation doesn't seem to have been much of an impairment. His movie is more of a personal depiction of Gehry than a measured examination of the institutional and historical significance of his often widely popular, and almost as often controversial, buildings.

This is very much a cinematic sketch of the architect as artist, in itself a conception with problematic aspects at which the movie barely hints. Pollack is a friend of Gehry and has managed things so that his own persistent presence in *Sketches* doesn't seem intrusive, or too cutely chummy.

Gehry appears to have wanted to give the filmmaker a lot of latitude, even granting him access to his psychiatrist (which doesn't yield much insight to his work). Pollack hangs out in the architect's Los Angeles studio, rides with him as he navigates the city in his car, talking of his life. (He claims he changed his name from Goldberg because of his domineering former wife's insistence.) Pollack accompanies him to Gehry's own first house, which he boldly redesigned, building an ostensibly incompatible shell around the original structure. He also speaks with a fair range of critics, commentators and connoisseurs, professional and amateurs (e.g., *The Boomtown Rats'* Bob Geldorf).

The director has kept his movie effi-

ciently paced—its sidelights, building-site stops and interviews adeptly placed. The inclusion of three entertainment industry barracudas—Barry Diller, Michael Ovitz and Michael Eisner—is a little disconcerting, although it does, probably unintentionally, remind us how architecture's fortunes and aesthetics are often in thrall to the powerfully self-promotional.

The late Philip Johnson (it looks like he's sitting in his famous glass house in Connecticut) tells Pollack that Gehry's work involves "the shape of light as it hits another shape." Gehry says his designs were early on impacted by Modernism's dictum that "decoration is a sin," and that his work most resembles that of the modest Modernist Alvar Aalto. This sounds odd when Aalto's simply elegant designs are compared to Gehry's often flamboyantly complicated and deliberately unbalanced buildings. (The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain is visited and commented on.) Gehry's inspiration seems to come more from Cubism and the post-Modernist artists he's known and admired, people like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.

This brute flamboyance is touched on by Princeton professor Hal Foster, who expresses his concerned ambivalence at Gehry's achievement of "spectacle," his creation of "sublime space that overwhelms the viewer." Gehry himself offers a crass and dubious estimate of how such work is validated: "If it's no good the market place will deny it."

Sketches is probably more provocative than it was intended to be. It makes an attractive and thoughtful introduction to Gehry's accomplishment, and his place in the architectural firmament. If Pollack's feature films had been as visually and thematically coherent and involving as this one, they'd have had more artistic heft than has too often been the case.

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