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Film

Posted: Tue., Jan. 26, 2010, 11:30am PT

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Sundance

The Kids Are All Right

By ROB NELSON

A Gilbert Films presentation of an Antidote Films, Plum Pictures production. Produced by Gary Gilbert, Jeffrey Levy-Hinte, Celine Rattray, Jordan Horowitz, Daniela Taplin Lundberg. Executive producers, Steven Saxton, Ron Stein, Christy Cashman, Anne O'Shea, Riva Marker, Andrew Sawyer, Neil Katz, J. Todd Harris. Co-producers, Charles E. Bush, Jr., Joel Newton, Todd Labarowski. Directed by Lisa Cholodenko. Screenplay, Cholodenko, Stuart Blumberg.

Jules - Julianne Moore
 Nic - Annette Bening
 Paul - Mark Ruffalo
 Joni - Mia Wasikowska
 Laser - Josh Hutcherson
 Jai - Kunal Sharma
 Clay - Eddie Hassell
 Sasha - Zosia Mamet
 Tanya - Yaya Dacosta
 Luis - Joaquin Garrido

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Annette Bening, left, Julianne Moore, Josh Hutcherson, Mia Wasikowska and Mark Ruffalo star in Lisa Cholodenko's 'The Kids Are All Right.'

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Sparked by wonderfully lived-in performances from Julianne Moore and Mark Ruffalo, "The Kids Are All Right" is alright, if not up to the level of writer-director Lisa Cholodenko's earlier pair of new bohemian dramas, "High Art" and "Laurel Canyon." Once again, the focus is on the neuroses of well-off hipsters living alternatively in conservative times, as a Los Angeles lesbian couple (Moore and Annette Bening) are rattled by the unexpected introduction of their hippie sperm donor (Ruffalo) to their teenage kids. Commercial prospects look solid for an ingratiating, sitcom-style entertainment whose genuinely stirring moments come rather late in the game.

Cholodenko's uncharacteristic degree of comedy (in combination with her unusually high budget) can be understood and to a fair extent applauded as a principled bid to sell alt-family values to the mainstream. The kids of a married lesbian couple are alright, indeed, even or especially if that couple is wacky in familiar ways. Alas, this is the sort of movie in which illicit lovers agree that they'll never, ever hook up again, followed by a shot of them lounging post-coitus in bed. Cholodenko's previous work has been about how it's complicated to keep relationships from turning messy; this film simply has too much of "It's Complicated."

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What the director's formulaic third feature does retain in full is her palpable and infectious love for characters and actors alike. By far the least likable of the bunch, uptight doctor Nic (Bening) nevertheless appears engagingly severe from the point when she learns that 18-year-old Joni (Mia Wasikowska) and 15-year-old Laser (Josh Hutcherson) -- yes, Laser -- have secretly sought out and met their biological father, Paul (Ruffalo). Moore's well-sketched Jules is at once whip-smart and loopy, an underachiever whose landscaping biz remains stuck in low gear until Paul, an organic crop farmer and restaurateur who starts coming to family dinners, offers her work on his scruffy backyard.

This development naturally abrades the wine-guzzling Nic, as college dropout Paul, acting warm and sounding seductive via Ruffalo's lilting purr, appeals irresistibly to the kids in paternal terms, and to Jules in sneakily sexual ones. Nic's eventual realization that Jules and Paul have been tending more than his bushes is indelibly captured in a moment whose slo-mo closeup on scowling Nic, pumped up with sludgy background noise, makes it play like a fight scene in "Raging Bull."

It's more or less at this point that the movie, like the characters, begins to drop its glib defenses and score on an emotional level. The alternately comfy and edgy rapport between Moore and Bening hits peak levels in a scene where the two begin to pull apart. By far, the screenplay by Cholodenko and Stuart Blumberg is most incisive in the film's final reels, as the effects of a culture clash waged on multiple fronts -- male and female, gay and straight, educated and experienced -- literally come home to roost.

As before, Cholodenko generously shares her keen ear for pop, the soundtrack ranging from classic rock to Wendy & Lisa, along with a too-cute scene wherein Nic and Paul, in a rare moment of bonding, warble their way through a rendition of Joni Mitchell's "All I Want." Working with stellar production designer Julie Berghoff, the director also displays a vividly geographic feel for L.A.'s funkier, leftist enclaves. All across the frame, tech credits for this upscale indie production are of studio-film sheen.

Camera (Technicolor), Igor Jadue-Lillo; editor, Jeffrey M. Werner; music, Craig Wedren, Nathan Larson; production designer, Julie Berghoff; art director, James Pearse Connelly; set decorator, David Cook; costume designer, Mary Claire Hannan; sound (Dolby Digital), Jose Antonio Garcia; supervising sound editor, Joe Lemola; re-recording mixers, Elmo Weber, Frank Gaeta, Patrick Giuraudi; visual effects, Scale; stunt coordinator, Mark Norby; assistant director, Jesse Nye; casting, Laura Rosenthal, Liz Dean. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (Premieres), Jan. 25, 2010. Running time: 104 MIN.

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