

Review: The Five-Year Engagement

BY JAY STONE, POSTMEDIA NEWS APRIL 27, 2012



The boy-man tries to come of age. Jason Segel plays a lost soul opposite Emily Blunt in *The Five-Year Engagement*.

Photograph by: Handout, Handout

A charming, off-kilter romantic comedy with Jason Segel as a chef who gives up his job for his fiancée (Emily Blunt). His resulting half-understood resentment almost sinks their relationship. This is a scattered, original film, in which the genre's typical boy-man is trying to come of age.

Starring: Jason Segel, Emily Blunt, Chris Pratt

Rating: Four stars out of five

Jason Segel has carved out a unique place in the gallery of boy-men -- the childish dolts who fear women and worship them, and also fear and worship things that explode -- who populate the modern romantic comedy. Segel's characters are foolish, but they're also good-natured and sweet. So, in the new film, *The Five-Year Engagement*, when his lost soul complains, "I'm just not the man I want to be right now," it's a poignant cry from the heart.

It's also meant to be funny, although *The Five-Year Engagement* has a bit of trouble separating the lost soul from the doofus. It's directed by Nicholas Stoller -- who shepherded Segel through the similarly

forlorn, but funnier, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* -- with a confounding array of shifting tones, dead-end narratives and eccentric asides, which ends up being part of the movie's charm. We know where it's going from the start (heck, we know from the title), but its improbable twists provide much of the delight.

Segel plays Tom, a sous-chef at a San Francisco restaurant run by a curiously intense woman who might chop off the end of her own finger before disappearing from the plot. Being sous-chef to a female boss is just part of the movie's sly subversion: This is a story about men learning new ways to be male.

Tom is dating Violet, played by Emily Blunt, who showed in *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* how she can be at once commanding and soft. Here, she has a sort of off-kilter maturity that is the flip side of Tom's earnest yearning. They meet at a New Year's Eve costume party, where everyone dresses as an invented superhero: He's Super Bunny, all in pink fur, and she's Lady Di, who "doesn't require a superpower."

Tom proposes marriage, but when she's accepted into a postgraduate psychology course at the University of Michigan, he has to give up his job and move to a snowy town where, in a memorable montage, prospective employers laugh uproariously at the very idea of giving up a good gig in San Francisco. "Are you f---in' brain-dead?" asks one. *The Five-Year Engagement*, for all its charm, will not win many fans in the Great Lakes State.

Tom and Violet have their ups and downs until the conclusion, whose obviousness is of little consequence: After all, they're living together, so what difference does a wedding make? The drama in *The Five-Year Engagement* comes from watching Segel and Blunt try to maintain a believable chemistry in the midst of what is, after all, a Judd Apatow project (he produced the film). That means navigating a host of strange and lovely characters, including Tom's goofy, lame-macho friend Alex (Chris Pratt, a sort of toned-down Seann William Scott), and Violet's emotionally cranky sister Suzie (Alison Brie).

Alex is an especially rich bad example -- he admits wanting to give his baby up for adoption, chalking it up to relationship honesty -- against which Tom can bounce his confused sense of loss. He's a man who has surrendered his own dreams to support those of his wife, and his idealism sticks secretly in his craw, part of the film's dismantling of new-age manhood.

There is also a rich assortment of unclassifiable types whom they meet in Michigan. They include: Chris Parnell as a sad-sack faculty husband whose life of child care and knitting stand like a beacon of lost hope in Tom's future; Brian Posehn as an unhinged fellow worker with an abiding interest in pickles; and Rhys Ifans as a genially improper professor to whom Violet is semi-attracted.

The film's key metaphor is the famous Stanford experiment, in which children are offered a marshmallow and told that, if they delay eating it, they'll get a second one. The new version -- which involves stale doughnuts -- is a metaphor for Tom's maturity. Can he put off his own happiness for a richer one later? The boy-man comedy may be growing up.