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TELEVISION

Mae Whitman buoys comedy about awkward teenager and her high school tormentors, co-starring Bella Thorne and Robbie Amell



BY ELIZABETH WETZMAN

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Mae Whitman (l.) and Bella Thorne in "The DUFF"

TITLE:

"The DUFF"

FILM INFO:

An awkward teen gives herself a misery makeover. Director: Ari Sandel (1:35). PG-13: Sexuality, language, partying. Area theaters.

Let's get this out of the way: DUFF stands for Designated Ugly Fat Friend — and you've probably been one yourself.

But before you take (understandable) offense, know this: It doesn't matter what you look like — even catwalker Kylie Jenner was recently seen rocking an "I'm Somebody's DUFF" shirt.

In director Ari Sandel's entertaining teen comedy, based on a YA novel, DUFF-ness is a state of mind: It's about owning your outsiderhood. As narrator Bianca (Mae Whitman) puts it, there's more to high school — and life — than princesses, athletes, brains and basket cases.

Snarky, slightly schlumpy Bianca happens to be BFFs with her school's most popular girls (played by Bianca Santos and Skyler Samuels). She's never



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thought much of it until football team captain Wes (Robbie Amell) points out that she's their DUFF. Every group has one: the wallflower who doesn't quite click, who consistently gets pushed aside.

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Bianca is initially depressed by this observation. But then she gets proactive, asking Wes to help her overcome her DUFF status.

The plan backfires spectacularly when Wes' girlfriend, mega-mean girl Madison (Bella Thorne), decides to ruin Bianca. Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are her weapons of destruction.

It's a modern twist on a classic kind of tale — classic being the John Hughes-era '80s. "The DUFF" references predecessors like "The Breakfast Club" and "Can't Hardly Wait" with wit and humor. It's easy to connect to Bianca's misery and be inspired by her defiance.



**Robbie Amell and Mae Whitman, with Bella Thorne (far r.) in "The DUFF."**

Still, there's something off about a movie that suggests we should all embrace our inner DUFF yet presents an entire cast of superhot teens. It feels like the whole screen's been airbrushed: Bianca's friends are beautiful, her crushes are gorgeous, even the extras are extra-attractive. Where are the geeks, the fangirls, the painfully uncool or even just awkward kids?

Fortunately, the cast — featuring Allison Janney as Bianca's scattered mom and Ken Jeong as her sympathetic mentor — is savvy and silly.

Really, though, most of the credit goes to Whitman, who stands in, and stands up, for the DUFF in all of us.

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