

Jersey guy Kevin Smith grows up -- sort of

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Who else but a Jersey Girl would start random conversations with strangers about their porn-renting habits and masturbation practices or, at the age of 7, ask to perform a scene from Stephen Sondheim's bloody musical 'Sweeney Todd' for a school pageant?

Actually, make that one Jersey Boy named Kevin Smith (a.k.a. Silent Bob). Though he now lives on the other side of the country, the Highlands born-and-bred filmmaker remembers his Jersey roots in the new film "Jersey Girl," a valentine to his wife and the state that, as he puts it, "gave a fat kid a nice place to grow up."

"Jersey always was and will be home," says Smith. "I went out of my way to make sure my daughter was born there, so no matter where she goes in life, she'll always be a Jersey Girl."

Smith, who wrote and directed "Clerks," "Mallrats," "Chasing Amy," "Dogma" and "Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back," is famous for packing as many uses of the F-word as possible into two hours through his films' trademark characters, Jay and Silent Bob. In contrast, he paints an uncharacteristically sweet and emotional story in "Jersey Girl."

Ben Affleck plays Ollie Trinke, a fast-talking New York entertainment publicist who loses his wife in childbirth. In his grief, he commits professional suicide by yelling at and insulting a crowd of journalists, which forces him to leave the city and the life he knew and loved.

He moves back to Highlands, his New Jersey hometown, and in with his father, played by veteran stand-up comedian George Carlin. As he settles into devoting his life to raising his daughter, he still struggles with accepting that the man he has become is a far cry from the man he once was.

"It's really a sweet movie," Affleck says. "I realize that if there's a Frank Capra working in the movies today, it's Kevin Smith."

Smith began writing "Jersey Girl" about five years ago, not long after his daughter was born.

"As my wife, Jen, turned out the lights in the baby's room, I was struck by this grim thought: that the choice of putting my professional life in the backseat while I become more present in my personal life wouldn't be mine if my daughter had made it through delivery, but Jen hadn't," Smith says.

These thoughts of how he would deal with losing one love, while having to raise another, spurred him to pen 50 pages that night. Those 50 pages would spend years in a drawer until an encounter with Affleck, a long-time friend and associate.

JERSEY GIRL

Written and directed by
Kevin Smith
Starring Ben Affleck,
Raquel Castro, Liv Tyler,
George Carlin and Jason
Biggs
Opens today
Rated PG-13

Affleck was a Red Bank resident for a short while, crashing on Smith's couch during the filming of "Chasing Amy," released in 1997. After finishing filming "Pearl Harbor," Affleck had a longing to work with Smith again on a character-driven film.

"I said to Kevin, let's do something like we did in 'Chasing Amy,' " Affleck says. 'Let's do something small, let's do a human story.' I felt like, 'You give up the Jay and Silent Bob and the comedy crutch, and I'll give up the action thing, and we'll just try to do something where we have no support for us other than the story and the acting. And I think it was really good for both of us.'"

So, Smith finished the script, and the rest is a movie that is very unlike those for which he's best known.

"Jersey Girl" is Smith's first PG-13 movie, and his first movie with a significant budget: \$35 million. This is a stark change from Smith's first film, "Clerks," which he financed by maxing-out his credit cards. Smith admits that his loyal following of comic-book geeks and Jay and Silent Bob fans will not be happy with the film.

'It's not fair to lump them all in the same group, because some of them are having kids themselves," Smith says. "But there are certainly 13- and 14-year-old boys who are Jay and Silent Bob fans that are not going to go for this picture at all. It's about three distinctive levels of maturity, like: Get the job, then get the spouse, have the kid, responsibility, whatever you want to call it. So it's kind of like, what do they (have) to cling to in the movie? Nobody's really hurling out expletives, no one's palling around the mall with their hands in their pants. So, the moment I started writing it, I knew I was going to lose them.

"But what am I going to do? I can't really live my life in service to the 13- or 14-year-olds. I gotta do what I gotta do, and hopefully some will follow. Thankfully, I've been doing this for 10 years, and the fan base has grown up with me, they're having kids as well."

There was also a fear that "Jersey Girl" will be panned as another "Gigli," last year's box-office flop starring Affleck and then-girlfriend Jennifer Lopez. While Lopez has a cameo role in the first 12 minutes or so as Affleck's wife, the movie's main love interests lie in the hands of Liv Tyler, who plays the local video store clerk who is conducting a graduate study on family porn-renting habits. Then there's Raquel Castro as Trinke's 7-year-old daughter, stealing the show wherever she goes, especially while re-creating "Sweeney Todd" amongst a sea of "Cats" performances at a school pageant.

"Hopefully, the movie's gotten the word-of-mouth that, hey, it's not about them (Affleck and Lopez), it's about him and the kid," Smith says.

But not to worry, underlying this serious story is Smith's humor and comic in-jokes that true fans will get. There are even cameos by his wife and his daughter, Harley. And Jerseyans will appreciate the underlying subtleties of the story, like making the commute back and forth to New York, driving on the Parkway, going to the diner and more.

Smith says that despite the controversy, uncertainty and possible perception that he has sold out, he's still the same guy he always was.

"My job never really changed from movie to movie. My job's always been, write the script, rehearse the actors and make sure the actors give as good an on-camera performance as the one I heard in my head when I was writing it, or better. So it didn't matter what the budget was, my job stays the same."