

Sorry, Charlie

Teen romantic comedy is all flicker, no flame

CHARLIE BARTLETT: Directed by Jon Poll. Written by Gustin Nash. Cinematography, Paul Sarossy. Music, Christophe Beck. Starring Anton Yelchin, Robert Downey Jr., Hope Davis and Kat Dennings. MGM, 2008. R. 97 minutes. ★★☆☆☆



Charlie Bartlett (Anton Yelchin) in his office

Combining elements of *Rushmore* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* as well as the illicit-entrepreneur plot of *Risky Business*, *Charlie Bartlett* suffers greatly by comparison to these films. Charlie, forced to attend public school when his private school expels him (like Max Fischer), gets suspended and nearly expelled from public school (like Ferris Bueller) but not before fulfilling his dream of becoming popular (like Joel in *Risky Business*) through a most unusual business opportunity. All of which, short of copyright infringement, is as close as it comes to getting your hand — nay, arm — caught in the cookie jar of older material. But as it turns out, being derivative isn't *Charlie Bartlett's* greatest weakness. A man by the name of Jon Poll is.

Poll has been rolling around Hollywood for years, editing the occasional comedy (*Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*) while serving as producer to a handful of others, including *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. In Hollywood's version of the Peter Principle, Poll must have avoided offending his superiors, at which point he was promoted to his level of incompetence, which turns out to be the director's chair. It's Poll who misunderstands and mishandles the delicate material of *Charlie Bartlett*, which finds Charlie (Anton Yelchin) selling pharmaceutical drugs — such as Ritalin and Xanax — to students in order to become popular. Now, there's a fine point to be made here, that being the great double-standard of prescription medicine, which by many accounts we overprescribe to adolescents while shielding them — I'm clutching my breast in mock alarm — from the ravages of marijuana. But in Poll's hands, which have yet to develop a light touch, the jokes fall slab-flat and the situations, if not offensive, offend the sensibilities.

There are some redeeming qualities to *Charlie Bartlett*. The supporting cast, in particular Hope Davis and Robert Downey Jr., do their best to keep things on target. Davis is a terrifically spaced-out baroness who, in an undeveloped subplot, has a husband in prison for tax evasion. Davis plays Marilyn Bartlett as carelessly indulgent, nailing the classic wealthy matron exactly, but she layers in

tenderness we don't expect. Downey Jr. doesn't fare quite as well: He's largely wasted as the conflicted authority figure in *Charlie Bartlett* — once out of school, he's constantly got a drink in his hand — but he's still Robert Downey Jr., after all, which means his Principal Gardner is capable of anything. The biggest surprise is the principal's daughter Susan (Kat Dennings). Dennings emerges from smaller roles in *Down in the Valley* and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* with a sweet, spirited yet tough performance as the disappointed daughter of a father spiraling down.

As for Yelchin, the Russian-born star of *Hearts in Atlantis*, there is hope for him yet. Poll doesn't do him any favors in *Charlie Bartlett*: There are lazy pauses where there should be quick edits, which suck out the air of Charlie's jokes, and in general Poll gives the sweetly effeminate Charlie too much room to wander. The film itself, like its main character, is an act of searching — for tone, for focus, for a satisfying resolution. When the end comes, it turns out it isn't Charlie who takes the stage, but rather someone he has inspired to make a stand for what they believe in. It's a nice touch, if a wobbly one, which is emblematic of *Charlie Bartlett*. **EW**

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Sat & Sun Mat 3:00

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9:45 Nightly Sat Mat 2:35 [R]

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THE BANK JOB R
1:30, 4:15, 7:00, 9:55

SEMI PRO R
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