

Together Together

Comedian Ed Helms has been active for years on television on “The Daily Show” and “The Office, “ as well as regular work in films such as the “Hangover” trilogy. His persona has toggled between the mild-mannered, if quirky, Everyman, and the manic, out-of-his-gourd nut case who feels the world closing in on him. In his latest movie, “Together Together,” he is almost always the controlled Ed (his character designs apps), yet touched with some zealotry: his deep desire, as an unmarried man, is to have a baby. This leads his character Matt into a practical, yet complex relationship with his chosen “gestational surrogate,” Anna (Patti Harrison), a woman half his age. We can see where this odd couple story is going, can’t we?

Yet “Together Together” has some twists along the way. The film, to assure us we will have a birth outcome, helpfully divides itself into trimesters, the first showing the leads, both somewhat shy (if frank when talking about the birthing process), jousting a bit with each other, and trying to find the appropriate space between them (there are no amatory vibes).

In the second trimester, they view the first sonogram and are asked if they want to know the baby’s sex. Matt says yes, he’d like to know for practical reasons, but Anna demurs, saying she would prefer a traditional surprise. They bat around names for the baby, seeking one that would work for either gender. An unsatisfactory stalemate results, so they turn to inanimate objects. This impasse leads to their agreeing to call the child “Lamp,” which becomes a low-key running joke the rest of the picture.

Other rituals of the pregnancy timeline ensue, such as contemplating a nursery and attending counseling and mommy exercises. One unexpected element comes when Matt, who is already dominating Annie’s time (she works at a coffee shop), asks her to move into his house, the better to gauge the process of this (his) pregnancy. She agrees, reluctantly, but then comes to resent that the pregnancy becomes more about Matt than her. He regularly introduces her bluntly as “the surrogate,” and she is shunted to the back of the room during Matt’s festive baby shower, with all his friends attendant and none of hers.

The film’s tone reminds me of Kumail Nanjiani’s “The Big Sick” of a few years ago. The humor is mostly deadpan and low-key and results from the disparity in the two main characters, their diverse ages and backgrounds. There are few flare-ups and no real fireworks. The script and direction are the responsibility of Nikole Beckwith, a woman with a career in theater and sketch comedy. It turns out she has a convincing and comfortable way with actors, too. *(The film runs 90 minutes and is rated “R” for language. It opens in theaters April 23rd and streams on May 11.)*

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