

GINA PICCALO

The Nerds' Last Hurrah

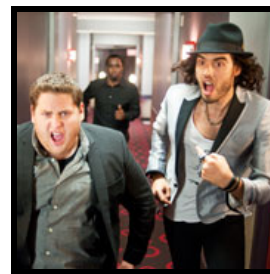
by Gina Piccalo



Like Lynn Fortner Farris, Cathy Morris Alterman, and



After a string of box-office bombs, *Get Him to the Greek* narrowly out-earned Katherine Heigl's *Killers* on Friday. But Gina Piccalo says the geek boom of the past several years is entering its late stages.



For years now, geek-chic, nerd triumphalism and the whole awkward-is-beautiful movement have saturated Hollywood. Lately, though, it seems the Era of the Exalted Nerd has begun reaching some kind of threshold.

One of TV's highest rated sitcoms is the CBS' nerd-rampant *Big Bang Theory*. Seth Rogen, a soft-bellied, bong-loving schlub in *Knocked Up*, is now a bonafide superhero in the forthcoming *The Green Hornet*. Lanky Jay Baruchel, a 98-pound weakling if there ever was one, recently headlined his own studio film, *She's Out of My League*, as the romantic lead. Pithy young Michael Cera, the emo-geek who single-handedly revived cardigans and spearheaded the hoodie revolution, will soon get tough and pound seven way-cooler dudes to win his girl's heart in the upcoming *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*.

"A nerd, by definition, is uncool," offers Judd Apatow's go-to casting director Allison Jones. "I think it should stay that way."

Most dramatic, though, is the ascension of Jonah Hill. Here, a chubby kid with a penchant for telling penis jokes is now a legit actor-writer-producer (at just 26) who will soon share top billing with Brad Pitt and Philip Seymour Hoffman in the Aaron Sorkin-scripted drama *Moneyball*. And this month alone, Hill stars in two films: *Get Him to the Greek*, opening Friday, as a beleaguered record company executive opposite Brit comedian Russell Brand's out-of-control rock star, and *Cyrus*, as a manipulative son set on sabotaging his mom's (Marisa Tomei) new boyfriend (John C. Reilly).

Much of the credit for this nerd renaissance goes to Judd Apatow, of course. He launched the careers of Baruchel, Rogen, Hill, Jason Segel and writer-director Nicholas Stoller, among others. And by all accounts thus far, the billion-dollar Apatow brand—and its youth ambassadors—own a big chunk of comedy in Hollywood. There are, however, a few notable hairline cracks sprouting. Last summer's Cera-Jack Black comedy *Year One* being Exhibit A, followed closely by the disappointing *Funny People*. Then in March, *She's Out of My League* tanked.

Now comes *Get Him to the Greek* and once again that Apatow formula is put to the test and moviegoers are asked to elevate another lovable dork to leading-man status. But there are limits to this archetype. Nerds, by definition, are supposed to be muttering bitter observations in the background not basking in the spotlight

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matching enter observations in the background, not backing in the spotlight.

"A nerd, by definition, is uncool," offers Apatow's go-to casting director Allison Jones, sitting in her view-less, utilitarian office as actors in the next room audition for NBC's nerd-nirvana sitcom *The Office*. "I think it should stay that way."

The problem with that, though, is that true nerds end up in Hollywood because they want to be hip—or at the very least—hip-adjacent.

Take Hill and Rogen. If anyone in Apatow's clique has staying power, it's these two. They both write and produce their own material. And they've proven their ability to draw moviegoers, Rogen with *Knocked Up* and *Pineapple Express* and Hill with *Superbad*. Lately though, both actors seem determined to prove they can thrive outside Apatow World in roles beyond comedy.

Rogen's dramatic efforts, most notably his turn last year as a bipolar, date-raping mall cop in *Observe and Report*, haven't gone over so well. And this year, his long-gestating comic book movie, *The Green Hornet*, has been dogged by some seriously bad buzz that raised questions about his ability to pull off a superhero. The film was originally set to debut this summer, then moved to Dec. 22 and has now been pushed to the badlands of January. The studio says more time was needed for the film's "3-D enhancements." If the comments on Nikki Finke's Deadline.com are any indication, no one's buying that. For his part, Rogen says he, fellow screenwriter Evan Goldberg, and director Michel Gondry "could not be more excited" about the movie going 3-D.

Hill, meanwhile, has been on a roll, appearing in six high-profile comedies since his first starring role in 2007. Then he landed the role of his career in *Moneyball*. But immediately after it was announced, sports fans and cinemafiles were scratching their heads over the casting of a plus-size comedian to play the real-life Paul DePodesta, an athletically built Harvard grad and former football player. One Yahoo Sports blogger called Hill as DePodesta "the worst insult in casting history."

When MTV News confronted Hill in March with the unflattering response to his casting, he laughed it off. These days, though, Hill seems to have found his righteous anger. Last week, while talking with reporters about *Get Him to the Greek*, he called out "the shit-talkers on the Internet" and said he relished proving them wrong. He knows he's been "written off as one type of thing." Namely, the horny teenaged loudmouth he played in *Superbad*. But this is the year that fans get a taste of his true range. And yes, he plans to direct.

"I work really hard," Hill said. "And I could have sold out a thousand times between now and *Get Him to the Greek* and *Cyrus* and chose not to out of respect and appreciation for my career, which I value. ...I really put a lot of meticulous thought into these decisions."

This brand of earnest is exactly what nerd expert Jones adores about the breed. They may slip into the mainstream on their self-deprecating charm, but none of them plans on staying the punchline forever.

"I think they should run the country!" she says, forgetting for the moment that with Barack Obama in the White House, they technically do. "They are pure."

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Gina Piccalo spent a decade at the Los Angeles Times covering Hollywood. She's now a contributing writer for Los Angeles Magazine and her work has appeared in Elle, More and Emmy. She can be found at ginapiccalo.com.

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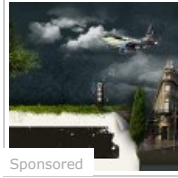
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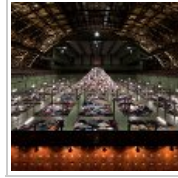


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BettySchaefer

With all due respect, the assertion that Jonah Hill and Judd Apatow have ONE LAST CHANCE to save their careers is laughable.

I saw Get Him To The Greek a couple of weeks ago and it was terrific fun. Not super-deep, but it rolls along nicely and will do fine at the US and UK box office.

6:28 pm, Jun 3, 2010

Rattlesnake93

These guys will always have careers, as long as they keep making the occasional "Knocked Up" or "Super Bad". They're sense of humor is pretty unique when compared to most movies right now, which makes them appealing. And they definitely have the ability to continue writing new material that is above average.

12:46 am, Jun 4, 2010

OrangeDoorHinge

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6:11 pm, Jun 4, 2010

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