

Seinfeld succeeds with failures in 'Comedian'

Chronicle of Seinfeld's return to stand-up an interesting portrayal of the form

"Comedian" opens with images of underground New York comedy clubs—cramped, smoke-filled, low-lit places living below street level. We see quick clips of stand-up comics mid-act, as they test new material and polish their stage presence. One of them is Jerry Seinfeld.

You have to wonder if anyone has ever looked so out of place and so at home at the same time.

Just four years ago, Seinfeld was the King of Comedy, having parlayed his stand-up act into one of the most popular sitcoms of all time. When he walked away from the show (and from NBC's god-zillion dollar offer) while sitting pretty at the top of the ratings, people were stunned. Where could he go from there? What would he do?

When he announced that he planned to return to stand-up, people were confused. How could television's reigning Golden Boy recede into the dredges of the nightclub circuit from whence he came?

After seeing "Comedian," it's easy to understand. For Seinfeld, as for all of the comics presented in the film, comedy isn't merely a pleasure or a profession—it's a driving force.

The movie documents Seinfeld's latest journey through

the clubs in which he originally made his name in the 1980s.

Having retired his entire repertoire, he sets out to develop brand new material the only way he knows how: trial by fire. We see Seinfeld going before many audiences in several different clubs, shaking off the rust and readjusting to a live forum in which there are no coached studio audiences, no supporting cast to fall back on and no second chances.

Christian Charles and Gary Shreiner, the men behind Seinfeld's American Express commercials, followed Seinfeld for a year and a half with a digital video camera, taping every show he performed on his self-determined comeback trail. What they discover is the often frustrating and agonizing birth of a comedy act.

"Comedian" presents a Seinfeld we're not used to: sincerely self-conscious, introspective and unsteady. We see him struggle through under-developed bits, forgetting material and outright bombing.

While his fame and reputation earn him some leeway with the crowd, he admits that audiences will only give any comic about a five-minute grace period. After that, if he's not being funny, it shows. Painfully. Stand-up comedy, generally thought to be sim-

plistic and pedestrian, is revealed as grueling, brutal work requiring long hours of preparation and a steely resolve.

The most insightful moments come when we see Seinfeld discussing the trade with colleagues including Colin Quinn, Chris Rock, Jay Leno and Gary Shandling. It's great fun to see these famous funny men drop their public personas and commiserate as friends and peers. And seeing modern superstars like Seinfeld and Rock in awe of their idols, such as Robert Klein and Bill Cosby, is a rare treat.

In particular, one scene near the end observes a humble Seinfeld soaking in a heart-to-heart with a warmly mentoring Cosby. The uncommon frankness both exhibit is strangely affecting as Seinfeld, stripped of all his showmanship and jovial smarminess, ruminates on his desire to locate something truly meaningful through his chosen art.

By the end of "Comedian," we believe that he just might succeed, too. The movie sheds light on stand-up comedy not just as an industry, but as an art form. Audiences who think it involves little more than a neurotic wise-guy getting up and telling a few jokes will be surprised to learn how much energy and emotion its practitioners invest in it.

"Comedian" moves along briskly, but loses some steam when the focus shifts to its secondary storyline, which follows up-and-comer Orny Adams as he navigates the same treacherous path as Seinfeld. Linked by their agent and by an early encounter in which the latter offers the former



Photo courtesy of Miramax

Jerry Seinfeld stars in his new film "Comedian" about a return to stand-up for the former television king.

some words of encouragement, Adams and Seinfeld are portrayed as parallel characters going through the same motions but at vastly different stages of their careers.

The problem is that Adams comes off as hostile, smug and frankly, not all that funny. Although appearances on the Late Show and at the Montreal Comedy Arts Festival (the Sundance of performance comedy) suggest Adams is on the cusp of taking the next step, it's difficult to believe he's capable of it. He's hampered by his own ego, lashing out at even the most constructive criticism simply because he feels any criticism is undeserved.

Adams's story doesn't work because it lacks many of the assets of Seinfeld's: the vulnerability, the intriguing self-doubt, and the creative interplay with fellow per-

formers. Seinfeld's cockiness is tempered with charm and self-awareness; Adams's is countered only by excessive anxiety.

And while Adams's routines are at best modestly clever, Seinfeld's best bits are as hilarious as fans would expect. His arsenal is reloaded, but his familiar style has not changed. Naturally, some bits don't work, but for the most part he's a veteran playing to his strengths and our expectations.

Though it offers plenty of laughs, the movie isn't strictly a comedy. Like stand-up itself, "Comedian" works by being raw, quickly paced and comfortably structured, and by doling out honesty with a wink. Casual "Seinfeld" fans may be disappointed, but fans of stand-up will be charmed.