

Rachel Getting Married

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [December 2, 2008](#) issue



Screenwriters love structure: it gives them something to focus on as they plow ahead in their storytelling or to retreat to if they get off track. Familiar structures include the road movie (looking for answers), the journey film (home to Ithaca) and the sit-by-the-fireplace flashback (“Let me tell you about Heathcliffe”).

Then there is the “gang’s all here” sequence, as in the opening of *The Godfather*, where we meet the key players and discover some of their concerns; or in the closing of *Hamlet*, where lingering problems are addressed and resolved, sometimes at the end of a poisoned sword. There is also the gang’s-all-here movie, a single two-hour set piece in which family secrets are revealed, confronted and argued over.

Rachel Getting Married, written by first-time screenwriter Jenny Lumet (daughter of famed director Sidney) and directed by Jonathan Demme, is a classic gang’s-all-here movie. It concerns a wedding that plays out over a long weekend in a large family house in Connecticut, where we get to know the principals, discover the problems and watch with horror or glee as they do battle over long-simmering resentments. On the surface all is joyous, with new-age good sister Rachel (Rosemarie DeWitt) marrying soft-spoken black music producer Sidney (Tunde Adebimpe). The house is thick with musicians, and the jamming and rehearsing take the place of a normal soundtrack—a terrific cinematic concept.

But the story has less to do with Rachel than with sister Kym (Anne Hathaway), the black sheep of the family, who gets a weekend pass from a nearby drug rehab center to attend the nuptials. Kym is a loose cannon, a nervous wreck who chain-smokes, lashes out and sweats in the hot glow of her sister's happy day.

Usually gathering films involve numerous subplots that gradually weave together into a thematic tapestry. This was the expertise of the late Robert Altman, who loved to piece things together like a jigsaw puzzle until his audience began to get a clearer sense of the point he was trying to make.

But *Rachel Getting Married* is rare in that it lingers on one powerful story that wraps its arms around the rest of the movie and won't let go. All the film really cares about are the problems the family has faced due to the many tragedies surrounding troubled Kym. Though we meet other important characters, including the upbeat father (Bill Irwin), the cool and collected stepmom (Anna Deavere Smith), the annoyed maid-of-honor (Anisa George) and the alcoholic-if-philosophical best man (Mather Zickel), all roads lead to Kym and her inability to be happy for Rachel or anyone else.

This star approach puts a lot of pressure on young Hathaway, and to her credit, she does solid work. We are even willing to ignore the fact that much of her bile and malice seems manufactured, relying a bit too heavily on smirks and sighs, eye-rolling and quick one-liners.

But then another performance pops up that jarringly reminds us of what Kym could and should have been—the abrupt appearance of the long-absent Debra Winger as Abby, Kym and Rachel's mother, now divorced and remarried. Winger is stunning in the role. She buries her obvious distress and painful memories beneath a placid exterior until a climactic scene where she lays her cards on the table. But her mere presence, and the memory of her work in the 1980s, make Hathaway's tiny flaws seem more pronounced, and we long for more complexity and ambivalence in Kym with her years of anguish, guilt and turmoil.

Rachel Getting Married also marks the return of the talented Demme to a genre of film that he has too long ignored, the oddball family story. Though he is best known for his message movies (*Philadelphia*), his blockbusters (*Silence of the Lambs*) and his documentaries (*Jimmy Carter: The Man from Plains*), *Rachel Getting Married* recalls the very early Demme, the one who turned out films such as *Citizens Band*,

Something Wild and the memorable *Melvin and Howard*, which contains one of the greatest opening dialogue scenes in all of American cinema.

Rachel Getting Married is too derivative and familiar to make this short list, but one can see the Demme touch all over this intriguing film. Let's hope that it brings him back to the world of quirky characters in tricky situations, a world that badly needs him.