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Author(s)	Robert Koehler
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'Wedding' takes cake in yummy, funny 'Pie'

By ROBERT KOEHLER

The purportedly final serving of "American Pie" is tastier than the previous two, now sad-looking chapters. "American Wedding" not only shows Jason Biggs' Jim growing up and getting hitched, but reveals the "Pie" filmmaking team operating under the assumption that the franchise's core crowd is growing up as well. Still, gross-out fans may take heart, because along with the changes come the nastiest — and funniest — stunts in the annals of the sub-genre, or at least since early John Waters. This perfectly timed marketplace entry should translate into terrific returns and very possibly result in one of the summer's bona fide sustainable hits.

Several factors account for the franchise's strong finish, beginning with the naturally comedic itchy time between proposal and nuptials, as well as "Pie" creator Adam Herz writing solo this time. With Jim and Co. out of college and entering the adult world, there is less purely late-teen frivolity and more interaction with older folks.

This means more room and time for vet comics, notably the upgrade

of the series' interest in some of Christopher Guest's core company (such as Eugene Levy and Jennifer Coolidge) including ample space for Fred Willard as the father of the bride.

The icing is young helmer Jesse Dylan's ("How High") surprising display of wonderful comic timing as well as farce sequences worthy of Francis Veber. Technically, pic looks and sounds vastly better than its

two older kin, with a major contribution by ace lenser Lloyd Ahern.

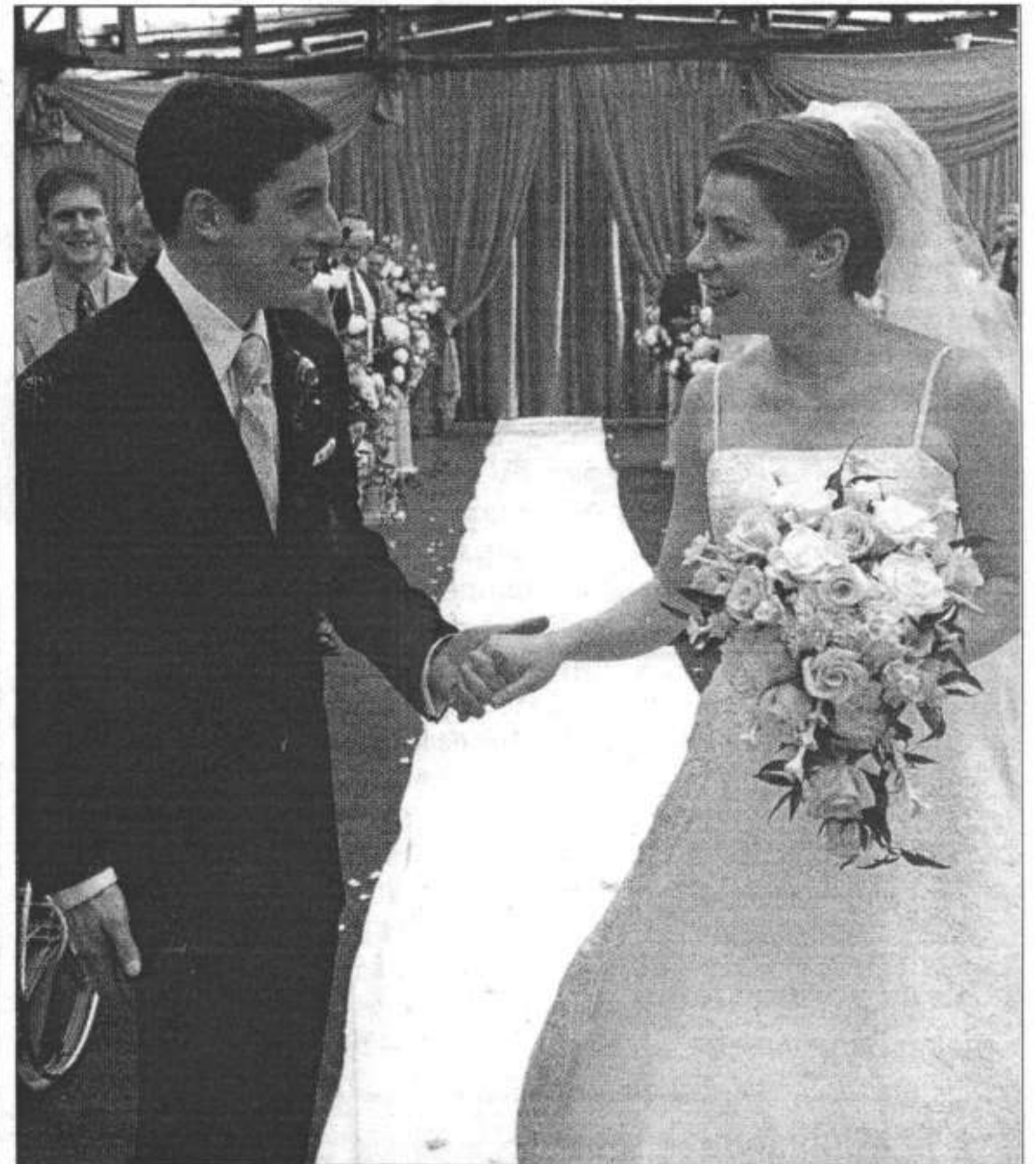
Starting with a solid premise — after three years' of sometimes crazy dating, Jim (Biggs) decides to marry Michelle (Alyson Hannigan) — Herz has constructed the script around five set pieces, each one topping the last. The first, before titles, gets things going raucously, with Jim popping the question in a fine restaurant as randy Michelle does her beau under the table, and Jim's Dad (Levy) shows up at exactly the worst moment.

Jim is a well-meaning guy drowning in his own worries, and his initial one — that he can't dance, meaning that he'll be a disaster at his own wedding — is nothing compared to what emerges as his real

problems. Those include, first, the impossibly buffoonish Stifler (Seann William Scott) barging in uninvited to the festivities and immediately plotting a wild bachelor party.

And second, there's Michelle's conservative, ultra-WASPy parents, Harold and Mary Flaherty (Willard, Deborah Rush), who first spot Jim in an extremely compro-

AMERICAN WEDDING
Directed by Jesse Dylan
Starring: Jason Biggs, Alyson Hannigan and Eugene Levy



GROOMED FOR LAUGHS: Jason Biggs and Alyson Hannigan tie the knot in "American Wedding," from helmer Jesse Dylan.

mising position as he's struggling with Stifler and the Flaherty's two dogs. "As the future protector of my first-born, you're off to a bad start," opines Willard as only Willard can to Biggs.

Even though it's beyond a stretch, Jim and his mates — led by wise, wily Finch (Eddie Kaye Thomas) — spy on Michelle shopping for her wedding dress, and venture to Chicago to recruit the

dress designer. It's all an excuse for a witty, high-energy sequence in a gay bar, which the clueless Stifler unwittingly stumbles into and ends up in a goofy dance-off with beefy patron Bear (Eric Allen Kramer).

"American Wedding" cannily finds several ways of having the young folks interact with their elders to maximum effect, and some of this spins around Mary deciding

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WEDDING PRESENCE: Eugene Levy, Fred Willard, Deborah Rush and Molly Cheek play the parents in "American Wedding."

AMERICAN WEDDING

A Universal release of a Zide/Perry-Liveplanet production. Produced by Warren Zide, Craig Perry, Chris Moore, Adam Herz, Chris Bender. Executive producers, Paul Weitz, Chris Weitz, Louis G. Friedman.

Directed by Jesse Dylan. Screenplay, Adam Herz, based on characters created by Herz. Camera (Deluxe color, Panavision widescreen), Lloyd Ahern; editor, Stuart Pappé; music, Christophe Beck; music supervisor, John Bissell; production designer, Clayton Hartley; art director, Greg Weimerskirch; set decorator, Brana Rosenfeld; costume designer, Pamela Withers Chilton; sound (Dolby Digital/DTS/SDDS), Cameron Hamza; supervising sound editor, Ron Eng; visual effects, View Studio Inc., Soho VFX; visual effects supervisor, Jon Farhat; special effects coordinator, Ron Trost; choreographer, Margueritte Derricks; associate producer, Josh Shader; assistant director, Mark Anthony Little; casting, Lisa Beach, Sarah Katzman. Reviewed at Pacific Culver Stadium 12, Culver City, July 29, 2003. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 97 MIN.

Jim Levenstein	Jason Biggs
Michelle Flaherty	Alyson Hannigan
Cadence Flaherty	January Jones
Kevin Myers	Thomas Ian Nicholas
Steve Stifler	Seann William Scott
Paul Finch	Eddie Kaye Thomas
Harold Flaherty	Fred Willard
Jim's Dad	Eugene Levy
Mary Flaherty	Deborah Rush
Bear	Eric Allen Kramer
Jim's Mom	Molly Cheek
Grandma	Angela Paton
Stifler's Mom	Jennifer Coolidge

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to make up Jim's mind for him on who will be his best man.

At the same time, Stifler sets eyes on Michelle's lissome blonde younger — and virginal — sister, Cadence (January Jones). Since Finch also has Cadence in his sights, this triggers complex, multi-character power plays and mind games that the series has never remotely explored before.

The whirlwind of relationships reaches a peak in the series' funniest single set piece, in which Stifler's planned bachelor party (complete with Bear and two ultra-sexy ladies) disastrously collides with Jim's own planned quiet dinner with Harold and Mary. It's as if the usual "American Pie" formulas were taken over by master farceurs, displaying a fierce and smart energy that's so often lacking in contempo American comedy.

However, the funny stuff isn't over, but continues for a quite satisfying conclusion during the wed-

ding prep and ceremonies, which Stifler single-handedly transforms into his own personal gross-out comedy masterpiece.

The ensemble of both returnees and newbies plays a well-balanced act between complete excess and droll underplay. Scott reps the former, taking a while to get into gear but finally virtually stealing the movie. Biggs and Hannigan generally play the latter style with charm and the right note of pre-wedding queasiness. Levy, Thomas and the "Pie" regulars seem even more confidently into their shtick than before. New entrants Willard, Rush, Jones and a crotchety Angela Paton as Jim's grandma all leave a terrific impression, with Willard reaffirming that he is in the top tier of movie funnymen.

Production package has matured along with everything else, with the extra sheen of design and visual elements not putting an unneeded polish on the de rigueur crudities.