

## Punchline ★★★½

**Year of Release:** 1988

Review by Randy Parker

**Country:** USA

**Verdict:** See It

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With the blockbuster comedy *Big*, Tom Hanks firmly established himself as one of the elite comic actors in Hollywood. In *Punchline*, Hanks, in an atypically serious and dramatic role, gives unquestionably his finest performance to date and demonstrates that his acting abilities extend well beyond comedy. Hanks plays down-and-out stand-up comic Steve Gold. Flat broke and having dropped out of medical school, Steve is a fledgling comedian and one of the regulars at "The Gas Station," a New York comedy club. Night after night, he and several other comics perform at the club for dismal pay in the hopes of getting a big break—that is, being discovered by a casting agent and getting a shot at network television and stardom.

Hanks shows incredible dramatic range in a deeply textured performance. Evoking everything from pathos to contempt, Steve is complex, self-destructive, and emotionally disturbed. In some ways, comedian Steve Gold is, believe it or not, even more immature than the 12-year-old Hanks played in *Big*. Steve is usually cold and mean-spirited to others, but occasionally he can be kind and warm-hearted as well, if it serves his purposes. For example, when another comic (Sally Fields) asks him for advice on her jokes, initially he is very friendly and helpful, but he immediately turns cold and vicious upon learning that she cannot pay him right away for his services. Despite these character flaws, or perhaps because of them, Steve is a great comic; he uses his personal bitterness and anger to fuel his comedy. From his displays of rage and anger to his quiet moments of pain and suffering, Hanks is enthralling throughout *Punchline*.

Although she must compete with Hanks' impressive performance, Fields is quite effective and holds her own as Lilah, a housewife who yearns to make people laugh. Lilah eventually becomes Steve's protégé and friend. He gives her pointers and drags her to some of his gigs. In one hilarious scene, Lilah observes Steve as he performs in a hospital to an audience of doctors, nurses, and patients. As friends, as rivals, and as almost-lovers, the chemistry between Steve and Lilah is strong. With Steve's help, Lilah learns to abandon her generic jokes and to use her family life as a rich source of humorous material.

Although *Punchline* provides some behind-the-

scenes glances at stand-up comedy, its prime emphasis is on Steve's emotional problems and on Lilah's conflicts with her family. Throughout the film, Lilah's husband—John Goodman in a magnificent supporting role—opposes her comedy career. He thinks that she is neglecting her family and abandoning her responsibilities as mother and wife. Like all of the major characters in *Punchline*, however, Goodman's is complex and dynamic, and the film avoids stereotyping him as a callous villain. He is never motivated by anything other than his love for Lilah and their two daughters.

Director David Seltzer brings sensitivity and authenticity to the scenes involving Lilah's family; these scenes effectively portray the turmoil that Lilah's comedy career has created at home. For instance, after returning home from watching Steve perform at the hospital, Lilah frantically tries to get dressed and prepare a dinner for company in 5 minutes flat. Lilah's home life also serves to underscore Steve's loneliness and solitude; whereas she always can rely on her family's love and support, he is estranged from his family and has only comedy to sustain him.

*Punchline*, like *Terms of Endearment*, is a film that successfully walks a fine line between comedy and drama. Seltzer always captures just the right balance with his delicate and deft manipulation of the movie's tone. In addition to delivering big laughs both on and off the comedy stage, *Punchline* provides powerful moments of human drama. Several scenes in the film, such as the almost-too-pat ending and the domestic scenes, easily could have been contrived and superficial. However, under Seltzer's steady direction and with the support of the fine acting and screenplay, these scenes are sincere and heartfelt.

As a long time stand-up comedy aficionado, I was naturally curious to see whether Hanks and Fields could perform comedy convincingly on stage. In the film, the two actors come across not only as genuine stand-up comedians, but as fairly good ones. At least part of the credit for this goes to San Francisco comic Barry Sobel who coached Hanks in his role and who has a small part in the film.

I do have a few minor criticisms of the movie. For instance, Lilah's one night transformation from nervous and awkward housewife to polished comedienne is too rapid to be believable. And a

scene in which Hanks bombs on stage because of an emotional crisis doesn't ring true.

Even if you don't like the cast or the subject mat-

ter, *Punchline* is a must see simply for Hanks' parody of the Gene Kelly "Singing in the Rain" dance number.

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