Kevin Smith skewers his 'sacred cow'

Sequel brings 'Clerks' up to date

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LOS ANGELES, California (AP) -- They may be the rudest guys to ever sell you a cup of coffee. Yet Dante Hicks and Randal Graves are the most beloved store clerks the big screen has ever seen.

The boys are back in a followup to "Clerks," writer-director Kevin Smith's comic gem that was part of an eruption of 1990s talent that led to the modern independent-film scene.

"Clerks II," which opened Friday, picks up a decade later with Dante and Randal as foul-mouthed, overly analytical and underachieving as ever, though they're dealing with grown-up matters like marriage, fatherhood and what passes for a career change in the slacker world.

Smith, who resurrected "Clerks" characters in "Dogma," "Chasing Amy" and "Mallrats," had tantalized fans by promising a "Clerks" sequel at the end of the "Dogma" credits. He later changed his mind.

"I was just like, that's a sacred cow, and I shouldn't really mess with the first movie," Smith said. "It's the one that put me on the map. What if your sequel sucks, and then people retroactively go back and hate the first one, and you lose all that goodwill?"

The good will is 12 years of adoring fandom for "Clerks," a rambling, talky, black-and-white flick shot for a paltry $27,575. Smith paid for the film largely by maxing out credits cards while working as a store clerk himself.

After a disastrous debut to an almost empty theater at New York's Independent Feature Film Market in 1993, "Clerks" caught some buzz in the press and was picked up by Miramax at the 1994 Sundance Film Festival.

"Clerks" took in a respectable but unremarkable $3 million at the box office, then gained a cult following as fans introduced friends to the movie on videotape.

"You're that 'Clerks' guy, aren't you?"
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Blockbuster video executive once asked Brian O'Halloran, who starred as Dante. The executive told him "Clerks" was one of Blockbuster's most stolen or unreturned videos.

"I was like, 'That's our fan base. A bunch of no-returning thieves,' " said O'Halloran, who re-teams with Jeff Anderson as Randal for "Clerks II."

What made Dante and Randal so popular?

"These guys don't have a filter in their conversation," O'Halloran said. "They're saying things in the male-companionship type of conversations that are taken obviously to a certain Nth degree that normal conversations wouldn't go. But it's subject matter not far from subject matter I and my friends and other people talk about."

'Luck and timing'

Outlandish sexual escapades. Insults involving anatomical impossibilities. Idle speculation about favorite movies, such as the notion Luke Skywalker and friends killed innocent independent contractors when they destroyed the unfinished Death Star in "Return of the Jedi." The plaint of the menial worker called in on a day off: "I'm not supposed to be here!"

That was the stuff of "Clerks," which along with such movies as "Slacker" and "Reality Bites" tapped into the ennui and restlessness of twentysomethings in the 1990s.

"For me, it was always far more luck and timing than talent," Smith said. "It said the right thing at the right moment about being overeducated and underemployed."

Deciding against a "Clerks" sequel in the late 1990s, Smith announced he was saying goodbye to that world with 2001's "Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back," the misadventures of the dope-peddling pair in "Clerks."

Yet after 2004's more adult comic drama "Jersey Girl," Smith wanted to continue exploring his feelings about people in their 30s and felt Dante and Randal were the way to go. Producing partner Scott Mosier did not share Smith's concerns about bringing back the characters after proclaiming them kaput.

"He was like, 'So what? You changed your mind. You told me when you were a kid you wanted to be a Jedi knight. Are you a Jedi now?' " Smith said. "In the end, it wasn't a good enough reason not to do it when I felt I had a story to tell. So at that point, I was kind of off to the races."

"Clerks II" begins with Dante and Randal forced to move on with their lives after seemingly being frozen in time for a decade working at the Quick Stop convenience store and its neighboring video-rental shop, actual stores where Smith worked while writing and shooting the original "Clerks."

Without spoiling the opening gag, circumstances send Dante and Randal off to work at a Mooby's fast-food franchise, where lunch is served with some disgusting additives amid obscene debate about pop culture, sex acts and which is the one true trilogy, "Star Wars" or "The Lord of the Rings."

"There's something in this to offend everyone," said Rosario Dawson, who co-stars as the Mooby's manager. "So many movies that are made now are so safe. They're trying to get as broad of an audience as possible, and the product is so watered down it's just an insult to the intelligence of most audiences. That's not at all what Kevin does."

"Clerks II" features cameos from Smith regulars Ben Affleck and Jason Lee, plus the return of drug dealers Jay (Jason Mewes) and Silent Bob (Smith), though they're no longer users themselves, a nod to party-hearty Mewes staying sober for the last three years.

"I think people relate to Jay and Silent Bob, dudes just sitting around smoking weed and being obnoxious," said Mewes. "A lot of people tell me, 'I have a friend just like that.' "

For all its vulgarity, "Clerks II" has a sweet sensibility and ultimately takes Dante and Randal to a place that should please fans of the original flick -- and could leave them counting on "Clerks III."
Smith said he would not rule that out, and he hopes to do a straight-to-video animated "Clerks" movie. But a third live-action film would be a tough sell for Anderson, who only agreed to do "Clerks II" after a lot of arm-twisting.

"If Kevin thought he had a hard time convincing me to do number two, he's in for a real battle to do number three," said Anderson, who initially thought the sequel was a bad idea but signed on because he liked the script. "This one's a very nice bookend to 'Clerks,' and I think the ending is really poignant."

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