

Episode 25: They're All That

I wasn't sure what to write about this week because I'm at that stage of lockdown where I'm so sick of every single piece of media that I'm barely finishing a movie. I haven't even watched a crime procedural this week, which is very out of character for me. Normally, when I feel like this, I would watch something nostalgic and low impact, like *10 Things I Hate About You*, or something. And it was while I was on the quest for the perfect late 90s teen flick to sooth my soul that I realised that they'd remade one of the all-time classics – 1999's *She's All That* had gotten a 2021 update as *He's All That*.

The reviews were... overwhelmingly bad. And not unfairly so. I watched it and it's not very good. And then I sort of wondered whether I was being unfair, and if *She's All That* was actually also very bad. But I rewatched it and it's not. And just like that I'd finished watching two movies and I had the topic for this week's podcast. Miracles do happen.

I'm Alex. This is Pop Culture Boner – the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking about *He's All That*.

I think I have a tendency to think about the mid-late 90s and maybe the early 00s as kind of the golden age of the teen flick. *Never Been Kissed*, *Drive Me Crazy* and *10 Things I Hate About You* are three that come to mind. Plus there were darker ones like *Cruel Intentions* and *Jawbreaker*, and sex comedies

like *American Pie*. I'm obviously pretty biased because I was a pre-teen/ actual teen when these films came out, but I don't think it's all nostalgia – they have really distinctive styles of set dressing, world building and story telling that teen films today either replicate or give a nod to. So, it kind of makes sense, given that it's now been two decades since the turn of the century, that we're starting to see some of these late 90s classics be revisited and remade.

If you don't have an encyclopaedic knowledge of 90s teen films, that's OK. I'm here to refresh your memory. *She's All That* is a modern adaptation of *Pygmalion/ My Fair Lady* and it's kind of the quintessential 90s teen makeover flick. Zack Siler, played by 90s heartthrob Freddie Prinz Jnr, is the most popular guy in school, but his girlfriend dumps him for a reality TV star while on spring break, which messes with his credibility. He decides that she's replaceable, but his friend Dean, played by the late Paul Walker, disagrees and bets him that he can't make over an uggo into a prom queen. Enter Laney Boggs, played by Rachel Leigh Cook, a girl who we are supposed to believe is unlovable because she's a vaguely politically aware art nerd who is of a slightly lower socio-economic status than her peers. As Dean makes the decision, Zack tries to back pedal saying, "Look, fat I can handle. Weird boobs, bad personality, maybe some sort of fungus. But come on... scary and inaccessible is

another story." But alas, Laney is the one.

After a few false starts involving performance art and beach volleyball, Laney gets a hot girl makeover courtesy of Zack's sister and is nominated for prom queen. The pair start to develop feelings for each other but since this isn't part of Dean's plan, he tries to derail Zack by telling Laney about the bet and trying to sleep with her. Zack and Laney end up going to prom separately – Laney fails to secure the prom queen title, meaning that Zack has lost the bet. But it's fine because they realise they're in love and kiss, ending the film on a high note.

When you hear people jokingly talk about the makeover where the allegedly hideous girl takes off her glasses to reveal that she's actually been beautiful this whole time, *She's All That* is usually at the top of their mind, even if they don't know it. The makeover as a trope is as old as the hills – like I said, this film is based on *My Fair Lady*, but everything from *Grease* to *The Princess Diaries* has some version. But the very minimal nature of Laney's makeover in *She's All That* is something often mocked. Essentially, Zack's sister takes her hair out of a ponytail, removes her glasses and swaps her overalls for a dress and suddenly she's socially acceptable. It's admittedly a pretty ridiculous excuse for a transformation, but the film itself is pretty camp (it features an extended choreographed dance sequence to the *Rockefeller Skank* for no real reason, plus an entire sidebar where Matthew Lillard is flinging himself around beautifully as a dyslexic volleyball player starring in MTV's *The Real World* and stealing Freddy

Prinz's girl).

Anyway, with features that iconic, I suppose a remake was probably inevitable. Cue *He's All That*, which was released onto Netflix and stars Addison Rae, who got famous for dancing on Tik Tok and has now dabbled in singing and as well as acting. This switched up version follows Padgett, played by Rae, who is a beauty influencer building out a college fund with her massive social media following. She's publicly humiliated when she catches her boyfriend, also an influencer, cheating on her with a backup dancer on a live stream. For some reason, people decide they hate her, her follower count drops and she loses her sponsorship. Like Zac before her, she dubs the boy totally replaceable and vows to build her following back up by making someone over.

Her friend Alden proposes the bet to make over an uggo into a prom king, and after rejecting some people who look objectively harder to transform, they settle on Cameron, resident sad photographer and horse boy. After finding an in through his younger sister, Padgett gets close enough to Cameron to convince him to get a makeover before a *Great Gatsby* themed birthday party. Eventually they develop feelings for each other, but Alden then reveals herself to be vying for Padgett's prom queen title and also sleeping with her ex-boyfriend. In an attempt to fully take Padgett out of the running, Alden also reveals the bet to Cameron. But fear not because after a weird dance off and a heartfelt speech about being yourself, all is forgiven and Cameron and Padgett ride off into the sunset on horses, having ditched college

to travel around the world.

Like its predecessor, the premise of *He's All That* is pretty silly. Unlike its predecessor, the execution of it is objectively pretty bad. And if I wanted to, I could do what most of the internet seems to have done which is rip it to tiny shreds and also mount impassioned defences of the original. But I think what I was actually thinking about while I was watching this 21st Century reinvention of the wheel was the things that they've chosen to change in this update – the desire to swap the gender dynamics, the desire to shoehorn in technology as a key dynamic to the powerplay, the fact that the whole film seems to be geared toward Tik Tok content and consumption, while also weirdly trying to tug on the nostalgia strings for people in my age bracket. It's a pretty odd combination all over. So, I thought we could have a look at some of those things in more detail, and, if we're agreeing that the execution of these updates is bad here, think about what an improved execution of *He's All That* might look like. Let's get into it, shall we?

The best place to start is at the top with the biggest update – the gender swap. Our disgruntled misanthrope and their popular counterpart switch it up, so we have 6 weeks to make a prom king instead. A revelation. Sort of. Not really. I think when we think about makeovers in 90s teen movies, because of the overwhelming popularity of a couple of classics, we do tend to think about a difficult girl being transformed into something loveable, usually so that she can fit the romantic interests of a male lead. I'm thinking about films like *10*

Things I Hate About You, and obviously *She's All That* fits the bill too. However, I would also argue that this 'difficult girl to dateable woman' version of events was also solidified as being common in the audience's mind by the 2001 spoof *Not Another Teen Movie*, which lifted the plot of *She's All That* verbatim while also pulling in references to everything from Jon Hughes to *American Pie* to *Varsity Blues* and beyond. I think the weird internal logic is – for something to be worthy of such broad-stroke parody, it must be the most common version of the thing. Except that actually the most common trope is women leading the charge on makeovers, whether it's for men (like in *Drive Me Crazy*), for other women (like *Clueless*), for themselves (like *Never Been Kissed*) or everyone as part of some Machiavellian working that no high school student could ever come up with (like *Cruel Intentions*→→). Like I said at the top, the makeover trope is as old as the hills, but given that the physical transformation aspect usually means some sort of aesthetic overhaul, there's almost always a woman at the helm to go shopping and apply makeup.

Which begs the question – what's the actual point of the gender swap in *He's All That*? I'm not overly cynical about reproducing nostalgia pieces led by women – I think I'm one of about three people that didn't mind the all-girl reboot of *Ghostbusters* – but I do think that the better moments of those films usually come when they acknowledge the change and how that would make things different. Not to go off on an action movie tangent, but one of my favourite trends I've seen in film recently has been the change in fight choreography to reflect

the size and shape of the lead actresses. It's all well and good for your Rhonda Rousey types to bash their way through a crowd, but I'm not going to believe some English waif doing her first blockbuster can roundhouse kick a villain through a wall no effort. I do believe that she'd try and smash his head in with a toaster, however. It doesn't have to be a complete conceptual overhaul, is what I'm saying – sometimes it's just five seconds taken to reinforce your right hook with a heavy household object.

He's All That doesn't have the metaphorical toaster right hook. Cameron is just expected to want the makeover because Padgett is a self-professed makeover queen and she says he needs one. He doesn't even put up a fight when she cuts his hair, which, having seen the impassioned defences of unwashed shoulder length mops that teen boys will mount if ever challenged, is maybe the most unrealistic part of the film for me. Either way, the swap feels ultimately pointless, which only serves to underscore the fact that Netflix seems to have hijacked a cheap IP to use as a vehicle for Addison Rae. Netflix has gotta grab the Tik Tok teen market somehow, it might as well be with the platform's 3rd most followed creator.

On a related side note, which I promise is leading on to another point, one of the other things that's really funny to me about the makeover, is that one of the ways they develop Cameron's character is by giving him band shirts to wear under his flannels. Nothing says "teen rebel" like a Stooges T-shirt under a flannel, right? But for some reason in one scene, he's wearing a G.G. Allin

shirt. G.G. Allin, remembered as the most revolting man in punk rock. A man who was arrested at least 52 times, and was notorious for shitting on stage, self-mutilation and getting into fights with the audience, amongst other, even more unsavoury things that I can't mention because they make me physically sick. That G.G. Allin. The idea that someone unironically interested G.G Allin would accept a makeover from a social media influencer so that they can fall in love and become prom king is deeply funny to me. But it's also funny to me in the context of the overall sanitisation of this film.

She's All That was made in the 90s, and the teens are... well definitely teens. Sometimes jarringly so. In the opening scenes, two girls in Laney's art class approach her to suggest that, in order to really be appreciated as an artist, she should just kill herself. Everyone drinks and has sex. There are several scenes where even the popular kids on the sports teams are chuffing down cigarettes like their lives depend on it. Even just the tame stuff, like the fact Zack's part of the bet involves him being nude at graduation, or that two bullies were made to eat their own pubes, are kind of gross and explicit. Now, obviously not all teenagers behave badly, drink, smoke or have sex, but under-developed frontal lobes make stupid choices, and stupid choices make the selfish bets, gross pranks, and over the top house parties that drive most of the plot of She's All That.


He's All That on the other hand, is so clean that the kids are drinking mocktails at parties where their parents are present (albeit hiding inside a big cake). The one guy they reference as selling

weed, is quickly swept to the side with "he's probably selling them kale chips" and then, as if to double down on that, he actually eats a kale chip out of his baggy. I can understand the impulse to sanitise some of the excesses of 90s teen flicks – times change, people want more considered portrayals of sex and drugs, even in comedic endeavours. But *He's All That* is so keen to avoid any and all potential bad teen behaviours that when the film's one single 'fuck' drops I jumped because it felt so out of place. Which is why the G.G Allin shirt is so funny to me – this film couldn't even drop more than one f-bomb or reference weed without confirming that it definitely wasn't weed. But sure, our sad boy protagonist is listening to the practically unlistenable music of the Murder Junkies no problem. I think part of the reason this film had to be so clean was the number of sponsors involved in its making. Now, the product placement in the film was excruciatingly obvious – at one point Cameron wants to leave the party and his friend goes "No, we should stay for free Pizza Hut!" and the camera pans over the boxes. Later in the same scene, when they do decide to leave, she says "Can I take a bucket of KFC?" before pulling a whole family-sized bucket into the shot. Everyone is always eating chips and conspicuously sipping branded water. It's very... prominent. That's not a new concept really – I remember similar conspicuous sips of Pepsi or Coke in big-budget summer flicks. But there are over 50 sponsors thanked in the credits of *He's All That*, including Bose, Old Navy, Lexus, Garnier, Frito Lay and Pyrex. It does explain away some of the weirder shots in the film – like when the villain spends a conspicuous amount of time

punching in the security code to lock up their house, and then you realise that one of the film's main sponsors was ADT, the security company... for some reason. Each of those brands is going to have a list of content that is brand safe, and my guess would be underage drinking and nudity aren't on the list.

If I can get my entertainment industry tin hat on a little bit here, this movie seems really designed to test the waters of Netflix's cross-promotional abilities with other platforms. They have a Tik Tok star at the centre, they're filtering in brand-safe content into an otherwise ad-free platform. If it's embedded into the content, then it gives Netflix another stream of revenue to sink into film and limited series production which they famously spend heavily on. This has the overall knock-on effect of making all the characters a little toothless – Padgett can't be a vain mean girl, and Cameron can't be an unlikeable loner, at least not if they're shilling speakers and bottled water. I'd also take a stab and say that that's why there's generally less moralising about technology throughout the film. Because they're kind of lazily selling to Zoomers, and anyone over about 35 seems to think that that's all kids care about, technology and influencers have to form a huge part of the plot. But because they're selling, they can't even have a lazy moral about the dangers of banking your college fund on being an untouchable online personality. Instead, the big takeaway is that Padgett pivots to travel content. I guess you gotta be nimble if you wanna keep those brand deals coming.

So, with all this in mind – how would you actually remake *She's All That*? Look,



I've been thinking hard about it and I don't know if you can. There's been a slow cleaning up of teen characters over the years. Some of that is a natural by-product of learning to be less racist, misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, fatphobic. I'm not saying we've nailed that bit, but I do think part of the desire to swap the roles in *He's All That* is because we're probably less inclined to think a man who makes a bet about improving a woman is forgivable. How dare you tell her to take off her overalls and put on a pair of high heels, she's comfortable! You can't tell her how to dress! But at least some of it stems from a little moral panic about what teens do or don't know – teen relationships are either Euphoria or *Degrassi* now. That is to say that they're either critically acclaimed and gritty or they're moralising. There's less room in the middle for something frivolous like *She's All That* where teenagers suck and are mean to each other and then kiss at the end. Which means that the ultimately unsatisfying conclusion of this podcast is – we should probably leave the nostalgia well enough alone, at least until we work out what a middle ground is.

So, there you have it. I've watched *He's All That* so you don't have to. If you take anything from this podcast it's that 1999 was a hell of a year for teen classics – *10 Things I Hate About You*, *Never Been Kissed*, *Cruel Intentions*, *Drive Me Crazy*, *Varsity Blues*, *Jawbreaker*, *The Virgin Suicides*, *American Pie*, *American Beauty* and *She's All That* all came out in 1999. I know I'm genre hopping a bit there, but wow. What a year. Anyway, if you're up for a movie marathon – you should talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub! Peace!

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Theme tune by Wes Fahey. ([Soundcloud: lee snipes](#))

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