No One is Friendly in “The Social Network”

Relationship status: In a relationship. Mark Zuckerberg, a Harvard sophomore, and his girlfriend Erica Albright are having a rapid and heated discussion in a dim Harvard restaurant in fall 2003. She longingly tries to keep up with him, but soon gives up. “Listen. You’re going to be successful and rich, but you’re going to go through life thinking that girls don’t like you because you’re a geek. And I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that that won’t be true. It’ll be because you’re an asshole.”

Relationship status: single.

So begins Facebook, and the Facebook movie, The Social Network, opening today. Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg of Adventureland) immediately runs back to his dorm room, grabs a beer, and, in revenge against all womankind, creates “Facemash,” a hot-or-not comparison website using Harvard’s photo directories.

When the site receives enough hits to crash the network, Harvard puts Zuckerberg on academic probation for six months. Soon, two Aryan rowers, Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss (both played by Armie Hammer), and their friend Divya Narendra (Max Minghella) enlist Zuckerberg to help create an elite Harvard dating site.

Almost immediately, Zuckerberg begins repeatedly ignoring them and coding his own more comprehensive website called “thefacebook,” which supposedly puts the full, exclusive social experience of Harvard online. When Zuckerberg launches thefacebook he quickly gains popularity and “groupies.”

Written by Aaron Sorkin (A Few Good Men, The West Wing, Charlie Wilson’s War) and directed by David Fincher (Fight
Club, Seven, The Curious Case of Benjamin Button), The Social Network is a classical story that follows its characters during Facebook’s inception as well as after the fact: Zuckerberg’s former partners sue him after he relocates to Silicon Valley in California, and these lawsuit proceedings add some variation and insight into Zuckerberg’s personality.

Jesse Eisenberg’s Zuckerberg is distant, hyperactive, and refractory. He’s doubtlessly brilliant, but he’s like an incredibly precocious and manipulative six-year-old who will get a lollipop by any means necessary. Eisenberg captures his clipped, guttural speech mannerisms, and he has a glint in his eye where the real Zuckerberg only has a glaze, a kind of defensive dullness.

About halfway through, the movie also introduces Sean Parker (Justin Timberlake), the flamboyant founder of the MP3-sharing site Napster. (In his first scene, he shares a bed with a Stanford student who he notes is from Orinda. This alone is worth the price of admission.) Over a drunken dinner, Parker convinces Zuckerberg to come to California, but he also lights the fuse for some of Zuckerberg’s most grievous mistakes. Every thesis, however, has an antithesis. Sorkin bookends The Social Network with a lawyer telling Zuckerberg, “You’re not an asshole, Mark. You just try so hard to be.” Zuckerberg’s response to this suggests that his company has grown much bigger than himself and his misdeeds.

While the action rises, one feels an exhilarating sense of dread and exhaustion in place of direct excitement. The Social Network drains itself tonally (it doesn’t conclude so much as peter out) as the protagonist ostensibly becomes more successful.

This and other ironies provide the movie with its main tensions and borderline-grandiose overtones. Zuckerberg becomes the youngest billionaire in the world, and he doesn’t even feign interest in money; he leads the world’s largest
social networking site, and he can’t even sustain a single human friendship.

The Social Network occasionally absorbs some of the traits of its leading character and moves too quickly for its own good; a few particularly frenetic introduction scenes are awkward and disconcerting. These scenes aim for vitality and drive, but they end up prescribed and inorganic (an intermittently distracting industrial-rock score doesn’t help).

Sorkin’s screenplay, though, is one of the most compelling in recent memory. He writes in specific, biting, oppressive strokes, which actually makes most of his dialogue devastatingly effective. Some of the movie’s most memorable moments come from brief exchanges involving the Winklevoss twins (“I’m six-foot-five, 220, and there’s two of me,” one quips when considering whether to beat Zuckerberg up).

Cinematographer Jeff Cronenweth paints the Harvard campus in warm, foreboding nighttime blacks and golds. The imagery itself can be overwrought and the symbolism can be cut with a knife: colored lights flashing on Sean Parker’s face; a fire starting in a dorm room. The consistency and strength of the dialogue, however, makes this sensationalism tolerable and even sleek.

How true is The Social Network? How much is sensationalism and how much is sense? Sorkin based the screenplay on Ben Mezrich’s controversial book The Accidental Billionaires, a semi-fictionalized, juicy account of the company’s history, so the movie is heavily embellished and condensed. Zuckerberg, for one, has said he won’t see the movie. Even though he’d be missing out on a sharp and ambitious story, maybe it’s because, in the end, everyone is just an asshole.

The Social Network

Opens today at the Orinda Theater
Directed by David Fincher, written by Aaron Sorkin; Starring Jesse Eisenberg, Andrew Garfield, Justin Timberlake, Armie Hammer, Max Minghella; 120 min.