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Married life, for better and worse

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By DIANE GARRETT

Leslie Mann wants you to know that the Viagra sex scene in "This Is 40" didn't happen to her.

Sure, the movie, one of several spotlighting the ups and downs of married life this awards season, draws on her union with writer-director Judd Apatow. And it stars their kids.

But don't confuse Pete and Debbie with Apatow and Mann.

"That's not us," Mann quickly asserts with a laugh when the chemically enhanced coitus scene comes up in conversation.

The scene, which opens the movie, sets the stage for frank treatment of marital relations. Over the course of "This Is 40," Mann's Debbie and Paul Rudd's Pete bicker about cupcakes, their parents and money. They also steal away for a romantic getaway from their squabbling kids and worry about their individual businesses.

"I think it's emotionally true to us, but also true to everyone," Mann says, citing common marital complaints of feeling neglected or that the kids are getting more attention than the spouse. "It's universal in that way."

Apatow collaborated with Mann on the script for years.

"We come up with ideas, and the reason why fights are balanced in

the film is because I try to figure out Pete and she helps me figure out Debbie," Apatow says.

The goal, Mann says, was to present a relationship that rings true, for better and for worse.

"I love the idea of taking a very serious subject and finding the humor in that," says Mann, calling "Terms of Endearment" her favorite movie. "That's a fun challenge to me."

The strong yet complicated bond between Alfred Hitchcock and his wife, Alma Reville, drew Sacha Gervasi to "Hitchcock." The movie, which revolves around the production of "Psycho," depicts a frustrated Alma (Helen Mirren) several decades into their marriage. Aggravated by his fixation with his leading ladies, and feeling unappreciated for her contributions to his work, she flirts with a screenwriter (Danny Huston).

"It's unusual to have a movie that's about marriage 36 years in," says Gervasi, whose wife recommended the script. "Most movies in Hollywood about relationships are about when you fall in love."

Although the movie has drawn criticism for its depiction of Hitchcock's foibles, Gervasi set out to show the iconic director's genius as well as his less-flattering attributes. Hitchcock does thank his wife in the movie, but Gervasi does not pretend that there's a storybook ending for the pair.

"This is not a traditional Hollywood fable," he says. "These moments aren't forever, so you better enjoy it while you can. There are many ups and downs to come."

"Amour" presents an even bleaker view of long-term marriage: Early on, music teacher Anne (Emmanuelle Riva) suffers a stroke, and her octogenarian husband must care for her as her condition disintegrates.

In "Hope Springs," Meryl Streep's Kay simply wants to rekindle the

passion with her long-time husband, portrayed by Tommy Lee Jones. Like "Life Is 40," it addresses sexuality in a frank manner.

Screenwriter Vanessa Taylor, who is not married but wanted to write about bringing passion and love back to a relationship, credits Streep for bringing her perspective as the female half of a long-term union.

"She wanted to make sure we talked about things that were appropriate," Taylor says. "I think she and our producers were also interested that we have some sort of discussion or mention of Viagra and similar medications. Because they felt like if we didn't, that would not be authentic. There should at least be a conversation or a question about it."

"Hyde Park on the Hudson," meanwhile, tackles a more unconventional relationship between Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Bill Murray) and his cousin Daisy (Laura Linney), just one of the women he consorts with outside his marriage to Eleanor. And "Anna Karenina," along with "A Royal Affair," focus on infidelity, always a popular dramatic subject.

Addressing everyday marital conflict in a realistic way without losing sight of comedy is a trickier feat, however. If you can find the humor in these situations, "it allows you to laugh at it," Mann says. "It makes people feel better about themselves. They realize they are not alone."

"Marriage is bloody hard," says Gervasi, who got hitched two years ago. "My friend always says, 'It's an ordeal, but I'm glad I'm going through it with my wife.'"

Bob Verini contributed to this report