

Barbie is the Bomb!

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Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, political science, and culture.

Today's Topic - Barbie is the Bomb!

Global tickets have already exceeded \$1 billion and rising.

We have four speakers today. First, we are going to hear from Sophia Saker who is an intern on What Happens Next. Sophia recently graduated from Brown and will be working for a Hollywood talent agency after the writers' strike is over.

What I am most interested in learning about today is how is it possible that Barbie has become a cultural phenomenon! At its core it is because of the response of young women like Sophia who have seen the movie three times already and want continued engagement with it. I want to find out from Sophia what is going on here!

I also want to take this comedy seriously and our second guest is Kay Hymowitz from the Manhattan Institute and the author of the book Manning Up: How the Rise of Women has Turned Men into Boys. I want to hear from Kay about the battle of the sexes in both Barbie Land and the Real World.

Our third speaker will be my sister Debbie Warren who loved Barbies as a child and wrote her graduate school application essay on collaboration when playing with Barbies as a kid.

Our fourth and final speaker will be the What Happens Next film critic Darren Schwartz and the topic will be why is this movie is so funny and entertaining.

My ultimate objective from this podcast is to encourage you to go out and see this film. It is that good.

Let's begin with Sophia's opening six-minute remarks.

Sophia Saker:

Barbie was written for me. As a recent Brown graduate from Chicago who is moving to LA to work in a Hollywood talent agency and who loves romance novels, I'm convinced that Greta Gerwig most definitely had my archetype in mind when she wrote this script.

I've seen Barbie three times, and each time I wear pink to the theater. My virgin Barbie voyage was in a tiny, cramped movie house when I was on vacation in Portugal with my family. There was absolutely no way I was going to miss opening night.

I listen to the Barbie soundtrack every day. I repost on social media every Barbie trailer and teaser. I've memorized America Ferrara's fabulous monologue about modern female angst. I've watched cast interviews; film critics and Barbie doll collectors discuss the movie and the Barbie dolls history. For this audio podcast, I am wearing a Gap pink and white button-down top that says Barbie in big pink letters on the back. I am all-in for this movie.

My love for Barbie is not unusual. There are millions of young women who feel this way. We live in a make-believe Barbie Land. And everyone in the Barbie enthusiast community has seen the movie and loves it. Many of us have seen it multiple times, and the cult is just at its infancy.

Rocky Horror is still going strong 48 years after the fact. And Barbie will have even more intense cult following given that Rocky Horror wasn't even a blockbuster hit when it was released.

Barbie connects across female generations. I am a part of that Gen Z female cohort that use social media and are open to taking Barbie's girl power seriously.

This film is a cultural phenomenon. Barbie is a blockbuster in such a monumental way. It's like the Wizard of Oz for this generation. It's funny, it's emotive. It's in technicolor. It transports you to another world like Dorothy moving back and forth between Kansas and Oz. It is about the journey.

I did not care about Barbie dolls as a kid. All my focus was on my American Girl Doll. So, my feelings about Barbie have nothing to do with nostalgia.

The film centers on the battle of the sexes and the conflict between girl power in Barbie Land and men's perceived success in the real world. Ken was a third-class citizen in Barbie Land where nobody cared about him. But when Ken is transported to the real world of Los Angeles, he's perceived to be a 10 like Bo Derek running on the beach. There was even a fabulous song to that concept in an all-male dance number dream sequence that absolutely kills it.

Gerwig makes the audience laugh at all the aspects of the patriarchy from the Mattel boardroom to the blue-collared construction site, but she also makes women in the audience yearn for a return to a fantasy Barbie Land where woman rule without any real male participation, of course, other than as eye candy.

This movie is a comedy about the state of current gender relations. I'm 22, and I have spent the past 17 years at the best progressive private schools in the country and was indoctrinated to believe in the dangers of the patriarchy and given a how-to manual on how-to take it down, I give Barbie my highest recommendation. It'll make you laugh. It made me cry. And it is pure joy on the screen. Films like this are timeless, and it is a must see. Do not waste another minute. Get to the theater and see it in person because the experience will not be as enjoyable when you see it at home by yourself. Part of the experience is seeing it with the audience. You're going to want to laugh along with everyone else. So go now!

Larry Bernstein:

You compare Barbie to the Rocky Horror Movie Show. My daughter loves to go to the midnight showing of Rocky Horror; she dresses up and screams out the most famous lines. Do you think that we will see similar audience participation with Barbie?

Sophia Saker:

That's already happening. When I went to see Barbie with my parents for the second and third time, people were loud in the theater, which is something that I've never experienced before, except for Mama Mia.

Larry Bernstein:

That's amazing. And why do you compare Barbie with the Wizard of Oz?

Sophia Saker:

I've seen a lot of old movies and very few of them stand the test of time. I don't really understand the context, the jokes, et cetera. The Wizard of Oz is timeless and Barbie has that same effect. In generations to come, people will watch Barbie even though it's set in our current world. Gerwig takes so much influence from old Hollywood particularly Technicolor and the excitement of The Wizard of Oz. And she totally brought that back for the Barbie movie.

Larry Bernstein:

I know that you are a huge Taylor Swift fan. How would you compare Swift's love fest with Barbie's?

Sophia Saker:

I am even more of a Taylor Swift fan, a Swiftie, than I am Barbie. I was born on December 13th, which if you know Taylor Swift that it's her birthday. I went to see the Eras tour in Vegas and in Foxborough, and I sat outside the stadium two times in Chicago when she was performing here, just to listen to the music from outside Soldiers Field. I am totally part of the Swiftie culture, which is an absurdly large fan base that is just booming right now. I've been there from the start.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think that both Taylor Swift and Barbie effectively use their history, or call backs, in their art as wink to their most engaged fans?

Sophia Saker:

Greta Gerwig does this so well in Barbie. If you played with Barbie growing up, you might've seen growing up Skipper where you lift her arm and her breast grows. That was a really big controversy. And there's also the Barbie with a TV in her back that was just an awful product. And Midge the pregnant doll, right? She put time and effort, and she thought about it.

Taylor Swift does the same thing. And her songs, she'll reference things about her life and her music videos. She'll put a cake somewhere. And on that cake is the design for the next album. It fans the flames.

Barbie, you can watch it a hundred thousand times and look for little details everywhere in the same way that I have listened to Taylor Swift's entire discography every day since I was 13. I never get bored of it. I probably sound absolutely crazy, but I just want to say it is a real phenomenon happening with my age group and generation.

Larry Bernstein:

Everyone dresses up for the Taylor Swift concert. How would you compare the fashionistas with Barbie and Taylor.

Sophia Saker:

It's very similar to the Taylor Swift Eras tour. People are decked out. You're not just wearing pink, but you're in a full cowgirl getup. You have glitter all over. Your hair is done up in braids or pigtails. I heard about this trend through TikTok and Instagram, seeing other people post it. It makes you feel like you're part of one community and that's what's happening with Barbie. It's also really fun to dress up like you're a little kid on Halloween again. This energy is still definitely there.

Larry Bernstein:

How crazy are the girl's outfits at the Barbie theater?

Sophia Saker:

The costumes are definitely racy. Women wear a crop top and glittery shorts and there is definitely a sexualized nature in the clothes that girls are wearing to the theater.

Larry Bernstein:

I am baffled by young women's reaction to Barbie. I thought that Barbie was perceived to be a bimbo?

Sophia Saker:

One of my favorite lines in the film is said by Sasha, who is at that table with all the other high school students. And she says, "Everyone hates women. Women hate women, and men hate women. And it's the one thing we can all agree on." And when I heard that line, I immediately thought of all the ways in which I have made comments about people's bodies and said, "Oh my God, this person's looking so anorexic today." Or, talking about someone, "she's super slutty." And what I love is that Greta Gerwig calls out women that uphold these sexist ideals.

Larry Bernstein:

There has been a lot of chatter about America Ferrara's monologue about female angst. I didn't think it belonged in this comedy because it as preachy, what did you think of what she said.

Sophia Saker:

She says, "you have to be thin, but you can't be too thin. But you can't say you want to be thin, you have to be healthy, but you have to be thin." I loved that scene because there's a lot of toxicity within femininity. Or if you want a guy, then you're not a feminist and you're not caring about your career. And, it's these contradictions, which is why I love the monologue.

It's interesting that you thought it was too serious for a comedy because I felt like we were in the moment of the monologue when Barbie is at rock bottom. She is just ready to quit, she's done, and this rallying speech that America Ferrera's character gives Barbie, I felt like it fit in pretty well. I felt the content of the monologue was so important.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think the monologue resonates more for women than men?

Sophia Saker:

It's definitely about how women think about women, and that's what makes it genius. When I saw the film with my dad, he said that he was confused by the monologue, is this how you see yourselves? He just didn't have any clue.

Larry Bernstein:

Would you date a guy who says he didn't like Barbie?

Sophia Saker:

On Hinge, a couple of guys have messaged me and been like, "oh, I hated the Barbie movie."

And I immediately blocked him, and I don't even want to hear what you have to say <laugh>.

Larry Bernstein:

My daughter loved the musical Wicked. It's the Wizard of Oz from the perspective of the Wicked Witch of the West. Do you think the sequel should focus on Ken?

Sophia Saker:

I would be really interested to see Ken's journey. I would love that.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each podcast with a note of optimism, what are you optimistic about Barbie?

Sophia Saker:

I'm very optimistic for the future of entertainment, because creators, writers, directors, are really listening to their fans and to what people want to see. And now social media, you can hear girls really want a story that takes their worst day ever seriously.

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Kay Hymowitz:

It seems odd that Larry decided to have an episode inspired by the movie Barbie, because he is usually a very serious man who discusses important stuff. But Barbie is actually a really important cultural phenomenon that can tell us a lot about feminism, contemporary progressive sensibilities, and the way the market works. The movie is the latest in a long series of brilliant chess moves confirming Mattel's place as the world champion grandmaster in marketing specifically to a progressive, relatively affluent, sophisticated customer. I don't know whether the company or the movie is woke. There's been a lot of grumbling about that, but I do know that Mattel understands woke's sales potential.

The most important fact to know about Barbie in order to understand this marketing success is her origins. In the late fifties, she was modeled on a German doll named Lilli, and like no other doll that had ever been seen in this country. Certainly, and it was not a doll for kids. She was a gag gift that was owned by men, based on a risqué cartoon character who had a lot of R-rated adventures, certainly not for kids. And she looked the part. She had breasts and curves and slender legs and red pouty lips, and heavy blue eyeshadow. Ruth Handler, the co-founder of Mattel, stumbled across this doll and was convinced that she could create a G-rated American version and that it would be quite successful. And in fact, girls went nuts over Barbie. And one of the reasons being that she hinted of adult sexiness and seduction, but mothers for the same reason hated her.

They didn't want their kids exposed to this. Ultimately, the kids won as they usually did in post-war American homes, and as they continued to do today. Mattel had to market Barbie as a parent friendly, if not wholesome, toy who could peak children's imaginations. They talked about her as aspirational, but maybe not in the way that parents might've wanted at that time.

The year she was first introduced was 1959, and the next year, birth control appeared on the market. After that we had a sexual revolution. You might think of Barbie as a prophet of that revolution, because even though she wasn't supposed to be really sexual, she was, and it could certainly compare to the baby dolls that the girls were playing with up until then.

Now, because Barbie was not to parents' tastes, Mattel had to play a very tricky marketing game. But by the late sixties, the feminists went on attack against the doll. They thought that Barbie modeled bimbos, and encouraged girls to become bimbos, anorexic ones at that, and to only be interested in clothes and shoes. Mattel saw this cultural shift that is the rise of feminism and turned it into marketing gold. They made Career Barbie, as I call it. Barbie has been produced to have 200 careers. She's been a fashion designer, a lawyer, a doctor, an astronaut, a ballerina, a pilot. My favorite is the paleontologist. And she's even run for president several times.

Each of those careers required different clothes and accessories: Barbie's Dream House, Barbie's cars. Barbie's RV, Barbie's boats and things like that. Mattel also struck it rich when diversity became the hot marketing too. They had already introduced a Black Barbie way back in the eighties. But they now have a Latina Barbie, an Asian Barbie, a wheelchair Barbie. And most recently, and most unlikely of all, a Trans-Barbie. There are Barbies with 35 skin tones and nine body types. The company celebrates the most diverse and inclusive doll line on the market today.

And that takes us to the movie which is the most ingenious marketing move by Mattel. Yet the trick was appeal to a cynical, increasingly educated and increasingly socially progressive public not inclined to look kindly on a fashion doll. They had to really finesse this.

Greta Gerwig did it for them in a big way. We have to admit it's brilliantly done. Mattel executives must have had to swallow hard, but Gerwig knew that irony towards Barbie and her history and the company itself was essential to selling this movie. The company was smart enough, as it always has been to read the room. Warner Brothers got their \$162 million opening weekend. And the streaming future is unlimited.

Larry Bernstein:

Did you like the movie?

Kay Hymowitz:

I did like the movie. I thought it was very smart, very, very funny. I thought the acting and the dancing and singing was great. And, it was funny in a very sophisticated way. Lots of visual puns, verbal puns, ironic jokes about so-called toxic masculinity. You don't know which side Gerwig is on half the time, which was very, very clever of her. It was just great fun to watch. Did you like it?

Larry Bernstein:

I did. They properly set the tone in the very first scene of the film. I didn't know what to expect. I was ill at ease. I had gone to see it based on the recommendation of my wife, and I was nervous what I was in for <laugh>

Kay Hymowitz:

And this is not made for me. You thought, right.

Larry Bernstein:

I didn't know what to expect and in that opening scene where the camera pans over the history of dolls and then you end up with Margot Robbie wearing some incredibly sexy outfit and then the 2001 music, and the girl's destroying the old dolls. It was hysterical, and it set the tone for the entire film that this was going to be fun and not serious.

Kay Hymowitz:

It was a brilliant opening. Gerwig must have sensed that she had to make it appealing to people like her, like us, and she did.

Larry Bernstein:

Gerwig makes fun of the Mattel management team. I have played the role of the suit in my corporate experience. And I would love for Will Farrell to play me. That would be the ultimate compliment especially because it would be hilarious. I loved the scene where Barbie walks into the boardroom wearing a very sexy cowboy outfit and Will Farrell pushes aside his subordinates to get her sole attention.

I think guys have gotten the wrong impression from the marketing and their peer set that this film is not for them.

Kay Hymowitz:

Yeah. One of the reasons that guys don't want to see this movie is because they suspect that it's somewhat anti-male. And people have said that and there's certainly a lot of jokes at men's expense, but I think it's terribly funny. And you have to have a tin ear not to see that Gerwig is poking fun at the concept of toxic masculinity. So she has it both ways, always. It's quite

successful that way. Now she went too far and the whole patriarchy thing that people took seriously, and I think that's baloney. Remember that Gerwig is a woman and she directed this movie with a huge budget. The head of the film business at Mattel is a woman. The star, of course, is a woman. The producer is a woman. It's odd to keep harping on patriarchy under those circumstances.

Larry Bernstein:

Who is the audience for this movie?

Kay Hymowitz:

This is not a movie for a kid. It's a movie for a 14-year-old and up. It's much too sophisticated for children.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think the film is making a statement about the current way kids fantasize about Barbie?

Kay Hymowitz:

We don't completely understand how children play with this stuff. One of the ways that Gerwig tried to get around that is to acknowledge that a lot of little girls would get kind of rough with their Barbies, <laugh>, remember the character Weird Barbie?

She had her hair chopped off. I remember doing that. We'd sort of pull the <laugh>, pull the legs apart, and she also did sex games with them too. And Kate McKinnon was very funny about that.

Larry Bernstein:

How would you compare Barbie with Sex and the City?

Kay Hymowitz:

Both Barbie and Sex and the City are about fashion and consumer consumerism. Carrie had this obsession with shoes, which is funny when you think about Barbie, because one of the things that Ruth Handler insisted on, was to take the original doll, which had no separate shoes, but just painted on shoes, and make sure that the shoes were replaceable, <laugh>. They sold a huge amount of fashion accessories, including shoes. I remember as a child, just loving those little miniature things. That's another thing that we sometimes forget is how much kids, like girls in particular, like miniatures doll houses and all the little furniture and all that.

Larry Bernstein:

We're first introduced to Ken in the movie just hanging out at the beach. Ken does not have a job. He doesn't actually understand his role in Barbie Land. And what's interesting about that is that Ken's predicament reflects the young girl's perspective of not understanding what men do or

what they should do. Ken is completely baffled on what his role should be in a young girl's fantasy world.

Kay Hymowitz:

That's really interesting. The idea of romance, falling in love, and Prince Charming, that is really downplayed in the culture now for girls. The whole role of men in girls' lives is in question, even for little girls. If you look at the Disney movies now, you're not going to see a lot of romance. You'll see friendship. In my day, the movies ended with a love match, or there was a flirtation and little love songs and stuff like that, that's disappearing from girls' fantasy life. I suspect it might be, because mothers and fathers are downplaying love and domestic life for girls. They really want to see girls working on their careers now.

A lot of young people are growing up with absolutely no sense that it is desirable to be thinking about love or raising children. There's questioning of very basic, very fundamental, understandings of how you become an adult. And the question is, "How much are they taking this idea that boys are not relevant to their lives?"

Larry Bernstein:

I loved the first dance scene where Ken played by Ryan Gosling is desperately trying to get Barbie's attention.

Kay Hymowitz:

Ryan Gosling, I remember thinking he did that so well.

Larry Bernstein:

Where he is working so hard to maneuver himself into the dance. Personally, I think he stole the show. I thought Margot Robbie was amazing as Barbie but Ryan Gosling was spectacular.

Kay Hymowitz:

Honestly. Just brilliant. But you're right, that was a big theme in the movie that men didn't really have a role to play. And many people, I think quite rightly, have seen this as a kind of comment on the current stage of gender relations, where a lot of women are being raised to not see themselves as needing men, and men as being superfluous to their real ambitions, their real aspirations, which are much more along the lines of career and adventure.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned that Barbie now has several hundred career choices available to her, and in the film, Barbie breaks out into the real-world, and she is seeking some girl power, so she goes to a construction site for some girl-bonding and reaffirmation, and she finds only rough masculine men, and she is shocked. Where are the women?

Kay Hymowitz:

It was funny because it was supposed to be a kind of parody. This is what I mean about the layers of irony in the movie. Sometimes you're not sure where Gerwig is on this. Like, she certainly doesn't think that women really will ever, or should ever, be equal on the construction sites.

It's never going to happen. There are all these differences between males and females, and realistically, we recognize that. But there's just a big struggle going on where part of the culture is saying, "oh, no, it's all socialized. It's not natural, and really sex is not a binary, it's a spectrum." The other people, like me, really do believe there are fundamental differences between the sexes and that you're not going to change it. You may open up some possibilities that women would be interested in, or men would be interested, but it's never going to really change the fact that they have different preferences and different interests.

Larry Bernstein:

When we arrive in Barbie Land, stereotypical Barbie played by Margot Robbie is driving around in her cute pink corvette and she is saying hi to all the other Barbies in town and it is like an advertisement for diversity, equity, and inclusion from a college brochure.

Kay Hymowitz:

Was Gerwig saying that girls get along so much better than men, and they're so friendly with each other and so supportive as they were in the movie? Or is she saying that in and of itself it's a funny idea? You can't really tell, the same reason that I found the whole patriarchy emphasis a little puzzling. Was that supposed to be partly funny? I couldn't really tell. I know that a lot of people thought it was for real. That is that Gerwig really was trying to critique the patriarchy in a way.

Larry Bernstein:

I mean if you put Will Farrell as head of the patriarchy that just is not serious.

Kay Hymowitz:

She's having it both ways where she's poking fun at the patriarchy, at the same time that she's poking fun at the concept of the patriarchy. There's another really funny scene where she comes back to Barbie Land with Ken and Ryan Gosling has introduced patriarchy to Barbie Land, and all of the Kens are on the beach. And the Barbies are cheerleaders, and the men are playing sports. But at some point, they show a guy who is watching The Godfather, and they make a point of saying, oh, it's the Godfather. And he's explaining The Godfather to the Barbie.

Larry Bernstein:

That was the first example of mansplaining in Barbie Land.

Kay Hymowitz:

I think that women have very mixed feelings about whether they want to be in charge, often and in relationships in particular. Maybe they like being boss. But I think in relationships, women are quite ambivalent. They don't want men who are too weak to put it bluntly.

There's this feminist cliché that really women are more turned on when men do the dishes than when they are acting as stereotypical males. I don't believe that <laugh> actually, I think they're grateful to men who are doing the dishes. And I think men should do the dishes because we're all very busy. And women have careers as well, but I don't think they're turned on by it. And I think that is a fantasy that feminists have tried to sell, that they don't want men to be too, "masculine." I'm not convinced about that.

Larry Bernstein:

Based on recent sociological work, we know that women are looking for male mates who have a similar educational attainment and higher social-economic status.

Kay Hymowitz:

It is ignored in the film <laugh>. It's not recognized as a reality. But you are quite right. And that's what research shows, not just in United States, by the way, but in even the most egalitarian countries in Scandinavia, for instance, women want to marry up. That is, they want to marry somebody who is earning either as much or more preferably more than they are earning. The education piece is not as primal, I don't think. There is more intermarriage between women who have, let's say a PhD and a guy that has a B.A., but they want them to be making more money. And the Barbie movie is based on the idea of girl power, that women don't need men, that they're not looking for men to be breadwinners in any way. I'm not pushing the idea that men should be breadwinners. I'm just saying that the reality principle here is that women have a preference for men who make more money than they do.

Larry Bernstein:

What was your favorite line in the film?

Kay Hymowitz:

My favorite Ken line, "I'm not a lifeguard because I can't swim, and I don't do boats," and Barbie says to him, "yes, you do beach <laugh>, you just do beach." He says, "yeah, I do beach." I just thought that was very funny.

Larry Bernstein:

Ken didn't like his life as a useless object. Ken has real aspirations. He attempted to get off the beach and jumped into the ocean, but the ocean was not real, and he injured himself.

Kay Hymowitz:

Right, that's one of those funny visual gags of which there are just many, including when they're going between the two worlds. You know, there's a sign says, real world <laugh> pointing this way.

Larry Bernstein:

Barbie travels to the real-world and is horrified about what she sees there, but Ken is over the moon, he loves everything he sees. He loves being the object of attention and that men have an important role in society, and he is so excited that he can't wait to go home to Barbie Land to tell the other Kens the good news.

Kay Hymowitz:

Gerwig did an interesting thing there where she also acknowledged that you can't live in this fantasy land and have a meaningful life. And Barbie, that very famous line that's been quoted endlessly, "do you guys ever think about death?" She says, in the middle of this ecstatic dance. You guys think about death and everybody just freezes. It was making a serious point just about you got to take the tragedy and the limitations of life and workout meaning within those constraints.

Larry Bernstein:

Barbie is just a doll and she lacks nipples and a vagina. Tell us about the decision to make Barbie sexy but without the relevant body parts.

Kay Hymowitz:

At the time that Barbie was first into the market, there was a belief that you protected children from sex. Sometimes enlightened parents knew that they were going to tell their kids about the facts of life and they had all these nice books that would do it for them. But certainly, middle class life in the West, there was a protected space for children where they were not supposed to be exposed to too much sexuality. You could argue that Americans overdid it. I read recently about a school where the teacher got in trouble for showing Michelangelo's David.

But there was this idea of childhood latency where children really were not that interested in sex and shouldn't be aroused. The idea was to protect these girls, to keep them innocent because they were vulnerable to predation. And by the way, a funny little detail I came across was that Ruth Handler when they started to make Ken, she wanted to make a bulge at his crotch. And the other people on the team wouldn't let her do it.

Larry Bernstein:

Barbie makes her way to the real world and finds the owner of her Barbie doll in the high school lunch room. It is a young woman with four of her besties, and when she introduced herself as Barbie, she's met with hostility. The teenage girls find the idea of Barbie as violating current progressive feminist ideals. What did you make of that?

Kay Hymowitz:

Girls grow out of Barbie. It was always considered a doll for younger girls. When she first came out, she was imagined to be for like eight- to 10-year-olds. And our kids grow up faster these days, and most of 'em are finished with Barbie by around six or seven. But, the teenagers, it was a matter of pride to say that's kid stuff. I'm not interested in that. And probably today's teens are also aware that Barbie represents a different femininity that they don't want any part of. So that was what she was getting at there.

Larry Bernstein:

Well, the high school girls mentioned that Barbie's anorexic, she's highly sexualized, and represents an-Uber over the top feminist norms from a previous generation that we will no longer tolerate.

Kay Hymowitz:

Right. Exactly. And I'm sure that a lot of girls would say that. But teenagers haven't been interested in Barbie for a very long time.

Larry Bernstein:

And so why do you think her mother was so fascinated by Barbie?

Kay Hymowitz:

Being an adult female is very difficult. She has a daughter who hates her, she has a job that she's bored at, and a husband who seems useless.

Larry Bernstein:

He can't even speak Spanish.

Kay Hymowitz:

The idea there was to create this ordinary woman. She's overworked. She gets no thanks. Her interest in Barbie is supposed to be just her way of hanging on to a more innocent time. I did think that the speech by America Ferrara about how hard it is to be a woman, I have trouble listening to that and taking it seriously. Given that this is a comedy, and given how many level layers of irony there are in that movie, I wasn't even sure if we were supposed to take it seriously.

Larry Bernstein:

I agree that that scene should have been cut. It did not fit into the film.

Why is this movie a marketing coup for Mattel. Do you think it will rejuvenate the brand for the old audience of young girls? Or will this open up Barbie for a completely different audience?

Kay Hymowitz:

Very much the latter. I think that the Mattel company realized that they have a very large piece of the toy child market, and they wanted to expand. Dixon, who is the COO of Mattel, said “we want to appeal to young adults, mothers,” he calls them “Glamors,” that is glamorous grandmothers. This movie will do that.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned the importance of birth control in the sexual revolution in 1960. Why did you bring that up, and why is it important in the Barbie context?

Kay Hymowitz:

Because the introduction of a sexual doll means that young children were being introduced to a different way of thinking about womanhood than they had been in their play earlier. By giving us Barbie, Mattel wasn't launching the sexual revolution, but they were right in sync with it. It is a very interesting to me that these things were all happening at the same time.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each podcast with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about?

Kay Hymowitz:

Well, I'm optimistic about Greta Gerwig's career <laugh>. I'll tell you that. The movie is a big success. I'm optimistic about the cleverness of the movie and the wittiness of it. But I can't say that I'm optimistic about the relations between the sexes right now.

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Debbie Warren:

I started playing with Barbie, I was fairly young. I had the original Barbie, blonde haired, blue eyes, tall, skinny. I had Ken, who was very handsome, blonde haired, but his hair doesn't move. It's like plasticky. It's really actually quite nasty. I had her sister Skipper, who was also blonde and her hair was brushable. I had a few other dolls that I also played with when I played with Barbie like toddlers and babies because Ken and Barbie would get together and have kids, of course.

I had the yellow convertible and would zoom around the neighborhood with her. And I had her dream house. So, I had pretty much all the paraphernalia you could possibly have for Barbie. I recall getting a lot of her merchandise from hand-me-downs, house sales or gifts for birthdays. But my biggest score was vintage Barbie clothing for one of mom's friends. It was the 60s style, it was great fabrics, bright colors, flared pants, fabulous boots. And I even got a dickie for Ken; it's like a fake turtleneck where the fabric only covers the chest area so that Ken can wear a V-neck without it appearing like his chest is hanging out.

I never played Barbie alone. I usually played with my friends or with Ron, poor guy. And the only way that Ron would play with me is if we then played cars afterwards. I know a lot of people focus on Barbie's figure, her perky boobs, her ridiculously tiny waist and her extra-long legs. But the reality is I don't think kids that play with Barbie really focus on that or really register it. I mean yes, her boobs were a source of bewilderment, but only because as a young girl playing with her, we really didn't have any boobs. So, it's like wow, we're going to get some of these when we grow up.

Barbie wasn't really who we aspire to be or to look like. She was just a toy. Now I'm not exactly sure when I stopped playing with Barbie. But the next time she popped up in my life was when I wrote an essay for my business school application. I remember I wanted to write about collaboration. And so, for those of you out there that don't know me, I'm not the most passive person. I don't know any Bernstein who really is, now that I think about it. I'm independent and outgoing, but also a bit of a know-it-all, and quite stubborn. I wrote about how I played Barbies a certain way with Ron, and I believe I led the narrative of the story when we played. But when friends came over, they would try to add their two cents on how the story should play out. Now, I recall initially being quite annoyed by all this. I wanted to play a certain way, and they wanted to do something else. But then I realized that some of the ideas that my friends brought up were actually quite good. And so, my essay tied my Barbie experience and working with others as an adult together.

Mom read the essay and was like, "are you kidding me? You're writing about Barbie going to business school? No, it's totally inappropriate." And Ron was like, "you can't write about this." And he turned it into a term paper that lacked personality. And then I went to see Mrs. Karton, Ron's best friends' mom, who also happened to be an editor, and she was like, "this is great!" And she loved the personal touch. So that was what I submitted. And then on the first day of business school, we were all gathered in the auditorium for the dean to speak, and he started talking about how diverse of a class we were, and how interesting the essays were. And then he brought up about how a student had written about Barbie. And I was like, oh my gosh, hey, that's me.

Larry Bernstein:

I remember mom was bewildered that you decided to write your application essay on Barbie. She thought that it was a more appropriate topic for nursery school than for graduate school.

Debbie Warren:

Mom thought Barbie was juvenile. She thought it was a kid's play toy, and I should have written about something more professional.

Larry Bernstein:

I remember mom calling me to tell me that the admissions department awarded your Barbie essay one of the best in the applicant pool. How did we get this so wrong?

Debbie Warren:

It's a way of getting the attention of the admissions officer. And it's probably refreshing for them. Totally out of the box. Who else is going to write about Barbie? No one. And I bet the other essays were really boring, like Ron's term paper. Sorry, Ron, throwing you under the bus.

Larry Bernstein:

Collaboration and teamwork are core to the business school mission statement. But it's not clear that playing with Barbie's is the best way to show your group work. Why Barbie?

Debbie Warren:

When we were going to school, it was always about you. You do the paper, you study, you take the test, you do everything alone. And then, business school is all about collaboration. So, I was trying to think about a time in my life where I collaborated and it was never really in school. I thought of Barbie and how as a young kid, I would make up the ideas. I'd have friends come over, they would have different ideas as to how the story should play out for the day. And I realized when people put their thoughts in, it sometimes has a better outcome.

Larry Bernstein:

What was your favorite part of the Barbie movie?

Debbie Warren:

The beginning where Barbie gets up every day and everyone's saying hi to Barbie. Hi, Barbie. And I liked how it was really inclusive. I liked how female oriented it was. Woman president, woman congress, women rule the world. But when I played Barbies, I didn't really think of it that way.

Larry Bernstein:

How did you think about Barbie?

Debbie Warren:

Barbie was just an individual. She was married to Ken. They had babies. They lived their lives.

Larry Bernstein:

There was that Weird Barbie in the movie that represented the Barbie dolls that were physically assaulted by their owners - Torn to shreds, burned hair, magic markers on their face. Did you ever deface your Barbie dolls?

Debbie Warren:

Barbie was not physically assaulted in our household. She did do the splits a lot because I could not.

Larry Bernstein:

Could you buy a Weird Barbie at the store?

Debbie Warren:

No, absolutely not. You kidding me? Never.

Larry Bernstein:

Would you see the Barbie sequel if it is called Ken.

Debbie Warren:

Well, I thought the Kens were really funny.

Ken was awesome. And I love the jealousy. For me, Ken was never subservient. Ken was never insecure. Ken was just her boyfriend or husband. I didn't really see that side of Ken, but I can see it now because he was so second best.

Larry Bernstein:

How do you think about Barbie dolls when raising your kids with its underlying message for girls.

Debbie Warren:

I was brought up thinking I could do anything, right? I could bring home the bacon. I can fry it up in a pan. Anjali. Remember that commercial?

Larry Bernstein:

Yeah.

Debbie Warren:

But as a parent, I realized I couldn't work, be a wife and be a mother and be good at any of those. So, there is a trade-off. You can't do it all.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about?

Debbie Warren:

Gosh, I'm optimistic that my daughter will have a better life than I had as a woman trying to have a career, have a family, and being successful at all.

—

Larry Bernstein:

Darren, you're the film critic for What Happens Next.

Darren Schwartz:

Yes.

Larry Bernstein:

You're also the cultural critic. Barbie is a cultural phenomenon.

Darren Schwartz:

Yes, absolutely.

Larry Bernstein:

In what way?

Darren Schwartz:

It is Star Wars-esque. If you remember 1977, people were waiting in lines. I was 9 or 10. Some people saw it 50 times.

People were just obsessed with it. And people have seen this movie four or five times. I've seen it twice. I have had no Barbie dolls in my life and I've seen this thing twice already. I think it is a cultural phenomenon. There are so many different aspects of it from women empowerment. Some men are mad about it. We can talk about that. I'm not mad about it. I think it's amazing.

Musicals are back. I was thoroughly entertained. Performances were incredible. There are very bright colors as well, which I appreciate.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned that you did not have Barbie dolls growing up.

Darren Schwartz:

Correct.

Larry Bernstein:

Did you have a GI Joe doll?

Darren Schwartz:

Had a lot of GI Joe stuff. Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think that is because you preferred your dolls to have more violent tendencies?

Darren Schwartz:

Do you mean were Barbie dolls violent?

Larry Bernstein:

No. Like the dolls you had, like GI Joe, I think represent the armed forces. GI by definition. What other dolls did you have and was it always related to violence.

Darren Schwartz:

GI Joe dolls are there as essentially to keep the peace and to protect liberty. I mean, if you need violence to protect liberty, fine, but it's not on us. It's on you, whoever the you is. I don't think I had any other violent dolls except for GI Joe.

I like animals. I mean, there's violence in nature.

Larry Bernstein:

For sure.

Darren Schwartz:

Giraffes and elephants and things like that.

Larry Bernstein:

The film, like Star Wars, seems to have international appeal. Are you surprised that this uber American doll and cultural phenomenon resonates with international audiences?

Darren Schwartz:

I'm not surprised at all. People love American culture. They pay hundreds of dollars for Levi's in different countries. Seriously.

We don't get a lot of movies from Sri Lanka, but Sri Lanka like watches our movies. America is still the bastion of cultural entertainment and cultural degradation. That is why people love this movie across the world.

Larry Bernstein:

Sophia mentioned in her segment earlier that this film has the potential to be like the Rocky Horror Picture Show. Do you see yourself screaming at the midnight viewing at the Highland Park Renaissance theater?

Darren Schwartz:

It's got enough kitsch in it. I did see Rocky Horror movie show at the Evergreen Road in 12 Miles. People were throwing toast and rice.

Larry Bernstein:

We saw the Barbie movie together. This is the first movie we've ever seen together.

Darren Schwartz:

Well, in a theater. Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

In the middle of the movie, you got up and left. Now I would've thought that a film critic doesn't do that. What am I missing? What happened?

Darren Schwartz:

I needed to get a popcorn run, and I did want to slide into Oppenheimer.

Larry Bernstein:

Hang on. I told you that I was keto. And I couldn't have popcorn.

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah. Popcorn's for me. And, I gave you nothing. But I wanted to go to Oppenheimer because the first time I saw it, and this may be on a future show, there were major audio issues and I saw it in Oak Park, a larger theater, very echoey. A lot of people said they had a hard time understanding dialogue. So, I wanted to go in and check it out. By the way, for the record, it was much better audio. So that's where I was. And I came back diligently.

Larry Bernstein:

I think it is an odd time to do an audio check on Oppenheimer.

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

During the Barbie movie, were you able to follow the plot when you returned? Were you able to understand what's going on?

Darren Schwartz:

Fortunately, I was able to pick up where I left off.

Larry Bernstein:

Okay, good. What did you think of the opening scene of the film?

Darren Schwartz:

Absolutely loved it.

Larry Bernstein:

I mean the queen-

Darren Schwartz:

Helen Mirren.

Larry Bernstein:

-was introducing us to dolls of the past. And that young girls wanted to be like mom, feeding babies and serving tea with fine China, and then they introduce Barbie. And here was this fantastic Margot Robbie wearing a scandalous one piece zebra bathing suit. And the little girls looked at this doll and their collective jaw's drop. And they just started destroying their old-school dolls to the 2001 soundtrack.

Darren Schwartz:

I thought the opening scene was brilliant. And it was a precursor to all the cultural male-female dynamics themes that we saw the rest of the movie.

Larry Bernstein:

Men in our age, mid 50s, are very wary of seeing Barbie. What would you tell them?

Darren Schwartz:
Is that a thing? Is that a fact?

Larry Bernstein:
I mean, I talked to my brother-

Darren Schwartz:
Ronnie?

Larry Bernstein:
Yeah. I said, 'Ron, you gotta see this, it's fantastic.. He said, 'are you serious?' I said 'yeah I'm serious.'

Darren Schwartz:
I wasn't aware of the resistance to see it. I don't have any resistance to it. I'm a movie guy. I'm a film critic. I'm a cultural critic, <laugh>.

Larry Bernstein:
What are you hearing out there?

Darren Schwartz:
There's reporting that there's a spike in breakups.

Women saying, I've seen Barbie. I've seen the light. My guy not good. I'm out.

So that seems like it's a problem for people that are like the old Ken in the movie before Ken saw the light. Well before he saw the second light. Because he saw the first light, "Hey, let's do the men stuff," and then the second light was "maybe we gotta dial it back."

Larry Bernstein:
Barbie is a fantastic comedy, and I would like you to compare this film to great comedies of Hollywood past.

Darren Schwartz:
Well, you've made an assumption that I agree that Barbie is a comedy.

Larry Bernstein:
You are free to say and think whatever you like. This is meant to be like the old Siskel and Ebert show.

Darren Schwartz:
I would be Siskel.

Larry Bernstein:
I think you remind me more of Ebert.

Darren Schwartz:
Who lived longer.

Larry Bernstein:
Ebert. But he had jaw cancer and it was a total disaster at the end.

Darren Schwartz:
Which is unfortunate.

Larry Bernstein:
A brain tumor for Siskel, so it's not like it's a great end.

Darren Schwartz:
They should both rest in peace, because they're wonderful people. God bless them.

Larry Bernstein:
Ok, do you think Superbad is funnier than Barbie.

Darren Schwartz:
Superbad is way funnier, but Barbie is a much deeper film. Societal commentary that you can go really deep if you're paying attention, or you can just be surface level. Be like, oh, this is fun and fun colors and singing. Superbad was just raunchy funny comedy about young guys. It's literally the antithesis of Barbie. <laugh>. Barbie's a much better film. And if you're a dumb guy, you'll love Superbad.

Larry Bernstein:
Hangover versus Barbie.

Darren Schwartz:
Hangover <laugh> A hundred percent. Because it's funny. Barbie to me is more of a drama. I thought, oh my God, there's a tiger in the bathroom. I wasn't thinking about anything deeper than it's funny, these guys got drunk. What the hell happened? Where's that guy?

Larry Bernstein:
Where's that tooth?

Darren Schwartz:
Where's the tooth? Who took the guy? Why is there a guy in the trunk? Ok next, Godfather.
Barbie's funnier. What else?

Larry Bernstein:
How did you like when they caught Ken mansplaining The Godfather to Barbie?

Darren Schwartz:
Amazing.

Larry Bernstein:
They had an idea of having Ken point the guitar at the girl and play.

Darren Schwartz:
He played the song "Push." And I forget who sings it. I mean it's great. The lyrics meant he was gonna push, I'm dominating you. But on a separate note, he sang. Ryan Gosling sang that song. He sang that song, "I'm Ken." That song, "I'm Ken" is number 87 on the billboard chart.

Larry Bernstein:
That's it? I'm shocked it's not number one.

Darren Schwartz:
Right? It's working its way up. He is a Disney kid. Ryan Gosling is a star. I'm saying that I'm Ken will probably be top 20.

Larry Bernstein:
What did you think of the dance scene for I'm Ken?

Darren Schwartz:
Phenomenal. It was kind of a West Side Story type thing. They're all kind of wearing black and white. Ryan Gosling was in La La Land, which brought back the musicals. There are musicals now.

Larry Bernstein:
Ryan Gosling steals the show, every scene he's in, he just takes over.

Darren Schwartz:

I don't agree. I think they both steal the show.

Larry Bernstein:

One person steals the show. Okay. Who's the thief?

Darren Schwartz:

You're saying he steals the scene. I think at the end of the day, Margot Robbie had a lot on her shoulders to carry the whole thing. And, she pulled it off amazingly. Ryan Gosling was the foil.

Larry Bernstein:

No, he is the romantic love interest.

Darren Schwartz:

He was the romantic idiot. He's not a love interest. There was no point in time that she was actually interested in him.

Larry Bernstein:

I think it's a very pro-male film. I think we don't appreciate how pro-male it really was. We saw Barbie 1. Should Barbie 2 be called "Ken?"

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah. I think it could take the arc of Star Wars.

Larry Bernstein:

We could go back in time.

Darren Schwartz:

Star Wars came out and then Empire Strikes Back, so it could be Ken Strikes Back.

Larry Bernstein:

Darren, you saw Barbie for the second time today? Without me.

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

Did you dress up?

Darren Schwartz:
I did not dress up.

Larry Bernstein:
And why not?

Darren Schwartz:
I didn't think of it.

Larry Bernstein:
You think of everything? I just don't understand this.

Darren Schwartz:
I never saw people dress up.

Larry Bernstein:
I'm wearing a pink shirt.

Darren Schwartz:
It's a little bit of a soft pink or maybe a salmon.

Larry Bernstein:
It's the only pink I have.

Darren Schwartz:
Okay. Fair enough. I didn't think of it, but I totally support people that did.

I do like color. If I see it again, if I think of it, I can go pink pants, pink shirt, pink visor, pink socks. White shoes.

Larry Bernstein:
Perfect, contrast.

Darren Schwartz:
Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:
What did you think of the decision to use the Indigo Girls song Closer to Fine in Barbie.

Darren Schwartz:

Love it. One of my favorites.

Larry Bernstein:

Have you ever seen the Indigo Girls in concert?

Darren Schwartz:

I think I saw 'em at Pine Knob in Michigan, possibly part of the original Lollapalooza.

Larry Bernstein:

I saw them twice. They came to Penn when I was in college. And I also saw them at Carnegie Hall with my buddy Steve Fallek.

Now you started a band, and I asked you if you could play that Indigo Girl's song for this podcast. How is that going?

Darren Schwartz:

I since have gone online to look at the chords. So, I just picked up my guitar today and started it. And more than likely, I will refuse this. I will try to record it and play it. And if it's not horrible, I'll give it to you. But keep in mind, this would be a male playing a song that was sung by women and was played in female movie.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic: What did you think of America Ferrara's monologue speech?

Darren Schwartz:

I feel like it was a little too much. It was coming through anyways.

Larry Bernstein:

So, show don't tell.

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah maybe. And that might be one of the reasons why guys are mad about it, because it's too overt.

Larry Bernstein:

I didn't think her monologue was anti-male; it seemed to me the point was that women treat other women badly.

What did you think of Will Farrell's performance as CEO of Mattel?

Darren Schwartz:

It was genius. There was complexity. You didn't exactly know what he was thinking sometimes. Did you agree?

Larry Bernstein:

He was often confused.

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah. It seemed like he had his personal mission to forward Barbie's life and to make sure she was empowered.

Larry Bernstein:

Barbie said that she expected that the CEO of Mattel would be a woman. And Will Farrell takes that observation as a personal attack. Farrell asserts that he is a son of a mother, a nephew of an aunt, and that some of his best friends are Jewish.

Next topic, Ken tries so hard to get some love from Barbie, but no reciprocation, ever. Tell us about Ken's desperate struggle to get Barbie's attention.

Darren Schwartz:

Ken was frustrated. It reminded me of a 14-year-old kid. Nobody cares. The girls developed quicker.

They're more social, just seem more worldly. And obviously hormones are raging and he's trying to do everything to get her attention. He's got nothing. Nothing. He's got no game whatsoever. And so, most guys would be able to identify.

Larry Bernstein:

And he's very jealous of the other Kens. I mean none of the other Ken's are succeeding with the other Barbies. Why don't they just give up and say, look, these girls are not interested. Fine. Whatever, let's go beach.

Next topic is Ken's obsession with horses.

Darren Schwartz:

Well, I think horses do in some way represent masculinity.

Larry Bernstein:

In what way?

Darren Schwartz:

Kind of an old west cowboy way. The rancher, the cowboy, the guy. I mean, who doesn't watch Yellowstone? And Mount Rushmore, he had it changed into horses.

Larry Bernstein:

Oh yeah. When Ken returned from the Real World.

Darren Schwartz:

He changed Mount Rushmore I think women to horses.

Larry Bernstein:

That's right.

Darren Schwartz:

Another reference to another movie is when Kate McKinnon gives Barbie two choices. Weird Barbie says to Barbie, 'you have two choices.'

Larry Bernstein:

High Heels or Birkenstock. She says, I'll take high heels. She said, no. No.

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah. And do you know what movie that's from? The Matrix. Morpheus says to Neo, "Blue Pill – Red Pill." The Red Pill takes you to another Rabbit Hole. Blue Pill sends you back to The Matrix.

Larry Bernstein:

When Ken returns to Barbie Land from the Real World, what was the first thing he did?

Darren Schwartz:

Ken said, this is my Mojo Dojo Casa House.

Larry Bernstein:

Oh I love that! Tell us about the Mojo Dojo Casa House.

Darren Schwartz:

He and his buddies hanging out, they're drinking beer. He is wearing a fur coat. People are pumping iron. The women are now subservient. Someone who is a physicist is now bringing Ken beers.

Larry Bernstein:

I don't understand why did the Barbies succumb to this subservient role at the beck and call of the Kens?

Darren Schwartz:

Because Ken came to the real world and he saw the patriarchy.

Larry Bernstein:

Well, why would the girls fall into this trap?

Darren Schwartz:

There's probably an argument to say that that's a bit of a plot gap, maybe. Like, how did he do it? Here's the answer. Ken came to the real world, like the world we love, we live in; You and I. He saw the patriarchy. He was able to take that energy back and apply in a world that wasn't expecting it. And he was able to make that happen. So that's the way that I see it.

Larry Bernstein:

Darren, I end each episode with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about with regard to Barbie?

Darren Schwartz:

I'm optimistic about the state of male and female relationships. It pokes fun and it seems empowering. And I like the energy around it. It was great.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Sophia, Kay, Debbie and Darren for joining us today.

If you missed last week's show, check it out. The topic was, Is General Francisco Franco Still Dead? Our speaker was Michael Reid the author of Spain: The Trials and Triumphs of a Modern European Country.

Spain had an election last month, and we learned about the implications of a near tie in that election and what it means going forward for both Spain and Europe. The issues in Spain should be familiar to an American audience: too much immigration, abortion rights, and should the region of Catalonia be an independent nation.

I now want to make a plug for next week's show. The topic will be the movie Oppenheimer. Our speaker will be Jeremy Bernstein who is a former physics colleague of Oppenheimer at the Institute for Advanced Studies and the author of the book Oppenheimer: Portrait of an Enigma. I hope to learn about the scientific and engineering challenges for building the atomic bomb and

what it was like working directly with Oppenheimer. I found the movie entertaining, but they did not answer the big questions related to the bomb's development.

We will also be joined again by our movie critic Darren Schwartz! You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website whathappensnextin6minutes.com. Please subscribe to our weekly emails and follow us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Thank you for joining me, good-bye.