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Dave Barry parties with the stars -- dogs and babies, too

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DAVE BARRY

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By DAVE BARRY
So I've been hanging out with Owen Wilson and Jennifer Aniston.

Really. We were at this major party in South Miami the other night. It went for more than five hours, with people and drinks everywhere. Owen and Jen were great. They had a baby. In fact, over the course of the evening they had three babies, because there were problems with the first two.

Actually, the babies weren't theirs. And it wasn't a real party. The ice cubes in the drinks were made of plastic. It was a scene for the movie *Marley and Me*, which is being filmed partly in South Florida.

Marley and Me is, of course, based on the book by John Grogan, a newspaper columnist who wrote about his experiences with his dog, Marley. I want to state for the record that I am not a bit jealous about the fact that Grogan's book has sold, to date, 438 million copies and has become a major commercial empire, comparable to Microsoft, but with more employees. This does not bother me at ALL.

I mean, sure, I also wrote many columns about my own dogs, and I never got a huge bestselling book out of them. But that is my own fault. Grogan, in his writings, strikes a deep resonant chord with dog lovers by making two fundamental points:

- Dogs can be rambunctious, wild and sometimes destructive.
- But underneath it all, they are loyal, loving creatures with hearts of gold.

Whereas my dog columns had a slightly different thrust:

- Dogs can be rambunctious, wild and destructive.
- But underneath it all, they have the intelligence of seaweed.

Anyway, I was hanging with Owen and Jen because I had volunteered to be an extra in a scene being shot at a home on a cul-de-sac in South Miami. There were maybe three dozen of us extras -- some from the neighborhood, others who had responded to an ad in *The Miami Herald*. Our job was to pretend that we were guests at a surprise 40th birthday party being thrown for John Grogan (played by Wilson) by his wife, Jenny (played by Aniston).

The movie set, like all movie sets, was a confusing swarm of activity, with equipment and cables everywhere and an army of crew people wearing T-shirts, shorts and complex utility belts, striding around doing technical things with lights, cameras, monitors and props, which included eight birthday cakes. (The scene, as you will see, required a number of stunt cakes.) In charge of all this was director David Frankel, a smart and funny man who lives in Coconut Grove and whose credits include *The Devil Wears Prada* as well as episodes of *Entourage* and *Sex in the City*.

There is a definite hierarchy on a movie set. At the top are the director and the stars. Below them are the lesser actors and crew members. Below them are the support people who provide food, transportation, security, etc. Below them are the stunt birthday cakes. And at the bottom are the extras. We are there strictly as background. In fact, the crew people actually call us "background" when they herd us around.

"All right, background!" they say. "I need you all to stand over here!"

As an extra, you do a lot of standing around. First you stand around waiting for the set to be prepared. Then you stand around on the set while they rehearse the scene. Then you stand around being the background while they shoot the scene. Then you stand around waiting while they look at the scene to see if anything went wrong, which something always does. Then you stand around while they shoot the scene again. It goes on for hours and hours, the standing. But it's worth it, because the money is huge.

I am, of course, kidding. For a day's work -- and it can be a long day's work -- they pay you \$100, or what one of the extras, Joyce Newman of Miami, described as "one-third of a good pair of shoes."



Owen Wilson and Jennifer Aniston in Florida.

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So it's not the money. It's the chance to be in a movie and to be around movie stars -- which we were, although not immediately. First we were herded into the house, which had been decorated with balloons and a sign that said "HAPPY 40TH BIRTHDAY JOHN." We were handed drinks with plastic ice cubes, then positioned outside on the patio around the pool, which had been covered with a tent so it looked like nighttime. I was placed next to Joel Magolnick, a civil-litigation attorney from Key Biscayne who was chosen as an extra after his wife sent in his photo in response to the Herald ad.

In this scene, Aniston (as Jenny Grogan) was to carry the cake onto the patio from the kitchen while we all sang happy birthday to Wilson (as John Grogan) who would be holding a baby. "Jenny" would set the cake down in front of "John" and he would blow out the candles. Then "Marley" -- that rambunctious rascal with the heart of gold -- would lunge onto the table and start eating the cake. Oh no! The whole scene was maybe 45 seconds long.

We rehearsed it a few times with professional stand-ins standing in for the stars, a large stuffed dog standing in for the dog, and a doll standing in for the baby. Then out onto the patio came Jennifer Aniston and Owen Wilson!

Probably you want to know what they are Really Like. I would say, based on the hours I spent pretending to party with them, that they are nice. Really. They chatted and joked with us extras, and they were always gracious and polite. This can't be easy when you're surrounded by people who are pretending to be cool, but whose brains are clearly shrieking. "Ohmigod I am standing RIGHT NEXT TO OWEN WILSON AND JENNIFER ANISTON!"

No doubt you also want to know if Jennifer Aniston is beautiful. Yes, she is, although I want to note that so is my wife, who suspects that I volunteered to be in this movie solely so I could hang around Jennifer Aniston, which is not true, as I am a highly trained media professional. On the other hand, my co-extra, Joel, was definitely making flagrant moon eyes at Aniston. So finally I introduced him to her, and they had the following conversation, which I am not making up (bear in mind that Joel is a professional attorney whose job requires great precision with language):

ME: Jennifer, I'd like you to meet Joel.

ANISTON (shaking Joel's hand): Nice to meet you!

JOEL: Urg.

ME: He's in love with you.

ANISTON: Aww.

JOEL: Urg.

But before this relationship could flower any further, it was time to do the birthday-cake scene. There's an old saying in show business, usually attributed to W.C. Fields: "Never work with children or animals." This scene involved both. The dog -- actually one of 18 dogs being used in the movie to represent various stages of Marley's life -- was professional: When it was time for him to eat the cake, he immediately started eating the cake. It was more difficult to make him stop.

The baby, an adorable 8-month-old girl, did not work out so well. Moments before the scene began, her mom would hand her to Wilson, and, as Aniston appeared bearing the cake, we extras would start heartily singing happy birthday. The baby, separated from her mom and now hearing this hideous din, naturally started screaming. Wilson would gamely jiggle her, but this was not a baby who was impressed by celebrity.

We went through several takes with this baby. They'd get everybody settled, then the assistant director would say "Light the cake!" Crew people, working feverishly in the kitchen, would light all 40 candles, then hand the flaming cake to Aniston. The assistant director would say, "Action!" Aniston would emerge carrying the cake; we'd start singing; the baby would start screaming; Wilson would blow out the candles; the dog would eat the cake; the baby would be handed back to her mom and immediately stop screaming; the dog would be pulled off the cake. Then we'd all stand around, waiting to do it again with a new cake.

Hey, I've been to worse parties.

Finally they replaced the baby. It turned they had another, equally adorable, baby in reserve. This baby was also not crazy about the situation, but she didn't cry as much, and finally we completed the scene to director Frankel's satisfaction. Then we were herded outside to stand around while they set up the next scene. We continued being herded in and out until it was getting late, and everybody was getting tired, especially Baby No. 2.

At this point we were doing a scene where Wilson opens the front door and we all shout, "Surprise!" This time, Aniston was holding the baby. She was an excellent baby-holder, gentle and maternal and obviously very concerned about the baby's welfare. But no matter how hard she tried to soothe the baby, when this roomful of people shouted, "Surprise!" the baby pretty much freaked out.

We did a few takes, and then there was a delay. Then a *third* baby appeared. Apparently the movie industry has access to an unlimited stash of photogenic babies located somewhere in South Miami. Aniston gamely took hold of Baby No. 3, and, to everyone's relief, we finished the scene.

We had to do one last scene, which was mercifully baby-free. In this one, we all stood around on the patio and pretended to be old friends having a fun party time with our hosts, "John" and "Jenny." The thing was, at that point it felt as though we extras had been together for roughly as long as medical school, so in a weird way it actually did feel a little like a party.

If this scene stays in the movie -- it's scheduled for release on Christmas Day -- you might see me. I'm the guy in a black shirt, chatting with Owen Wilson and Jennifer Aniston. This was my big scene, and in all modesty, I believe that I delivered a nuanced, yet powerful -- even commanding -- performance. Especially considering that all you see is the back of my head.

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