

## THE SUPPORTING TEAM

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*The 40-Year-Old Virgin*  
[Photos Courtesy of Universal Home Entertainment]

Protagonist Andy (Steve Carell) and  
Nice Woman Trish (Catherine Keener)

The purpose of supporting characters is to support the story, the theme, and either the protagonist or antagonist. They are not created at random. Every character in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* shows us a different aspect of male-female relationships, from Andy's co-workers to the two women in his life.

This will sound obvious, but the purpose of your supporting cast is to support. They support the story. They support the theme. They support the lead character, or sometimes the antagonist. They support; they don't distract. That means the supporting characters will be integral to the story—organic. Not pasted on from the outside, but grown from the plot seeds of your central conflict. Coming up with a great minor character and forcing him into your story won't work very well. You want to create your supporting cast to fit your specific story.

Supporting characters often help to show different aspects of your protagonist. In a

hard-edged action script, you may need a romantic interest to bring out your hero's more humane side. In *Shane* and *The Road Warrior*, the hero's relationship with a kid is used to expose his non-lethal side. Without the Feral Kid, Mad Max would be so focused on the plot problems that we may not identify with him.

### Story Purpose

Every character in your screenplay needs to have a *story purpose*—a reason for being there. Supporting characters aren't just thrown on the page to give your protagonist someone to talk to in this scene, or someone to kiss in that

big scene on page 73; they are part of the story itself. Any character that can be removed from the story without harming it, *should* be removed from the story. You also should combine characters who serve the same story purpose into a single character—if the protagonist has two best friends who are there to support him, he may end up with only one. Combining two characters who serve the same purpose helps to better focus the story.

This year's raunchy sex comedy with heart is *Knocked Up*, starring Seth Rogen and Katherine Heigl as a one-night stand that reluctantly becomes a relationship. The film features the same writer-director (Judd Apatow) and much

of the same cast from 2005's raunchy sex comedy with heart, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. So, let's take a look at the supporting characters in *Virgin* and how they support the story.

*The 40-Year-Old Virgin* is both a workplace comedy (primary) and a male-lead rom-com (secondary), and it has a great comedy concept (title tells all). The story is about the guys at work discovering the protagonist Andy (Steve Carell) is still a virgin at 40, so they decide to remedy that. They do all kinds of things, from speed dating to strippers to setting him up with that bookstore girl with the very healthy sex drive, in order to deal with his virginity issue. Each situation is designed for comedy *and* to deal with aspects of sex and romance, which are at the center of the story. If you examine any single scene, you can easily see the "DNA" of the movie.

The workplace is the center of the story, so let's look at Andy's co-workers:

- 1) David (Paul Rudd) obsessed with his ex-girlfriend. He has never gotten over her, and the only thing he ever talks about is their time together.
- 2) Cal (Seth Rogen) with lots of theories about how to pick up girls ... most of them seem left over from high school.
- 3) Jay (Romany Malco), a guy in a committed relationship who cheats. He's a complete horndog who sees every woman as a sex object.
- 4) A scary and sexually aggressive boss, Paula (Jane Lynch, stealing the show). She asks Andy if he'd like to service her.
- 5) The two adult immigrant guys, Mooj (Gerry Bednob) and Haziz (Shelley Malil), who offer grown-up advice about romance—sort of. Both have been married so long that their sex lives consist of listening to the young guys tell stories.

Notice how each of these characters shows a different side of male-female relationships so that they connect to the comedy concept of a 40-year-old virgin. If all of the supporting characters showed different sides of how to deal with strict corporate policy, they'd be perfect for some other movie dealing with *that* subject. The supporting characters are there to support this story—each serves a story purpose by illustrating a different theory on romantic issues ... and, in the case of the sexually aggressive boss, a "worst-case scenario" for losing his virginity.



Andy and his supporting team at the salon

Every character in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* is *defined* by his viewpoint on romance, and his story purpose is to show those different aspects of relationships. When the protagonist is interacting with David (obsessed with his lost love), he's exploring a different aspect of romantic relationships than when he's in a scene with Jay (guy who cheats). None of these six characters duplicates the other's point of view, so our protagonist can learn from each of them. He could end up *becoming* any of them if he follows their advice—so each offers him a window to his own future.

### Romantic Choices

We also have two main female roles in the film: Beth, the nymphomaniac who works at the bookstore next door (the amazing Elizabeth Banks), and Trish, the nice woman Andy's age who is a customer in the store (the also amazing Catherine Keener). These are two extremes, and both offer solutions to the "virgin problem." He can either have wild, pointless sex or enter into a serious relationship. Lust or love? These characters also support the story—they're characters connected to the concept. Both have a story purpose. If you were to leave out the bookstore girl who symbolizes lust, our protagonist would have no choice but love. Without the lust choice, the story is over. Why doesn't he just hook up with the nice woman?

All of his buddies at work vote for lust for different reasons. The comedy comes from various attempts at getting the virginity removed from our protagonist—the speed-dating scene is two-dozen hell dates in about five minutes of film. The nightclub scenes allow for similar terrible relationships, like the drunk girl who wants Andy to blow into her Brealyzer™, then crashes her car.

While these things are going on, Andy is pursuing the nice woman, Trish ... and finds that her "go slow" theory works perfectly—he never has to tell her he's a virgin if they aren't going to sleep together for 20 dates. It's the easy way out! That means his secret (he's a virgin) turns into a big lie, and that will eventually destroy the relationship. The 20 dates become a "ticking clock" creating suspense as he marks off each date. It's not only getting closer to the big day where he will actually have to sleep with Trish (which frightens him), every date is one more day that he hasn't told her his secret—that he hasn't been honest with her about his virginity. This allows the conflict to escalate until it explodes.

Another subplot in Act Two that helps to support the main plot is Andy's relationship with Trish's two daughters, Marla (Kat Dennings) and Julia (Chelsea Smith). Trish's house is a world of women; no boys allowed. Many of the scenes deal with Marla, the oldest daughter, who is both protective of Mom and also

