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Dig into a helping of sweetness with 'Waitress'

Deborah Nicol
Desert Post Weekly
May 24, 2007

When life gives you lemons, make lemonade. When life gives you pie, find meaning amongst the ingredients.

The unassuming title of the late Adrienne Shelly's film is devoid of any description, implying a flat character who's nothing special. This is how waitress Jenna (Keri Russell) views herself and how her good-for-nothing husband treats her, but the rest of the world knows better. A culinary genius with an expertise in pies, she expresses herself through her pastry creations.

Much like the gastronomic folklore of "Like Water for Chocolate," Jenna uses the kitchen to work out her every contemplation. Each moment celebrated and aggravated earns its place on the changing chalkboard menu. When life moves too quickly, she freezes in a daydream, considering the ingredients that best suit her situation. Sorting out the pastry possibilities allows for a moment of clarity, though she is ultimately forced to open her eyes to reality.

Jenna has good reason to wish herself into a fantasy. Her rotten, insecure husband (Jeremy Sisto) never gives her a moment of appreciation, unless he's feeling amorous. When her guard is down she becomes pregnant, stagnating her plans for escape from the dead-end marriage. In fact, every opportunity for change comes with an impassable hurdle, and each of her acquaintances discovers similar conundrums and resulting transgressions.

Cheryl Hines ("Curb Your Enthusiasm") gamely portrays lopsided breasted Becky, caring for an invalid husband while seeking a passionate diversion. Director Shelly sweetly plays quirky Dawn, an awkward girl with no confidence who finds love in a man with excessive bravado. They represent Jenna's support system while constantly reminding her about the lousy life into which she's stumbled.

And herein lies the exquisite comedy. The girls are aware of their lots in life and a desire for change, and yet their commentary is bitingly funny. The dialogue and charm remain impressively consistent throughout the film. There are many options for tragic, dramatic turns, and Shelly's script skillfully avoids all of the usual traps.

Tragically, the life of this writing-directing-acting talent was cut short when Shelly was murdered shortly before the film premiered. The story was inspired by her own pregnancy and the flood of emotions associated with it. She dared to allow Jenna's character to refuse any affection towards the being growing inside her as she coolly writes her unborn a letter bluntly describing the world she will enter.

She does not warm to the baby through an ultrasound epiphany or hokey twist of fate, as Shelly never permits easy solutions within her peculiar little town. Russell breaks from her overly emotional "Felicity" days to play the strong but tortured Jenna, and her portrayal is a sign of good things to come.

"Waitress" is a genuinely sweet comedy, with all of the entertaining idiosyncrasies and none of the predictable saccharine. Adrienne Shelly has left a lovely legacy to the world, and a reminder that pie is what you make of it.



Searchlight Pictures

Keri Russell (center) stars in "Waitress."

WAITRESS

Rated: PG-13 for sexual content, language and thematic elements

Time: 1 hour, 44 minutes

Genre: Romantic comedy, drama

Language: English

Starring: Keri Russell, Nathan Fillion, Cheryl Hines, Adrienne Shelly, Lew Temple

Director: Adrienne Shelly

Showing: Opens Friday.

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