

## Briefly noted

### Love Actually; Intolerable Cruelty; School of Rock; The Matrix Revolutions

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18 November 2003

Love Actually, directed by Richard Curtis; Intolerable Cruelty, directed by Joel and Ethan Coen; School of Rock, directed by Richard Linklater; The Matrix Revolutions, directed by Andy and Larry Wachowski

*Love Actually* is an awful mess of a British film. Its stated theme is that contrary to popular wisdom, our day is not dominated by hate and violence, but by love. It sets out clumsily to prove this. A host of well-known British (and American) performers are on hand: Hugh Grant, Colin Firth, Liam Neeson, Alan Rickman, Bill Nighy, Billy Bob Thornton, Rowan Atkinson, Emma Thompson, Keira Knightley, Laura Linney and others.

As a writer Curtis is responsible for *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *Notting Hill* (1999) and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001). This is his first effort as a director.

Taken at face value (and more seriously than it deserves to be), the central thesis of *Love Actually* simply doesn't hold water. The filmmaker's argument, backed by an extensive opening montage of embracing couples, families and assorted loved ones, is that the events of September 11, 2001 are not the rule, but the exception: love is all around us. But whoever suggested that terrorism, war and social conflict were incompatible with personal affection? After all, the 1930s and 1940s, far more horrific decades, produced no shortage of love stories. It seems an oddly irrelevant contention. The more pertinent one, which Curtis ignores entirely, might be: have love relations been affected in any qualitative way by these events?

A cynic might suggest a few alternatives as the film's genuine theme. "There will always be an England." "There will always be an English middle class." "There

will always be English middle class love and sex, or fantasized versions thereof."

The film has a few amusing moments, but its overabundance of characters spend most of their time working themselves up for would-be dramatic or comic moments that fall flat. The work is lopsided and misshapen, not like life, but a poor, contrived, somewhat disoriented impression of life. Certain of the performers seem particularly unfortunate.

Laura Linney has to take her clothes off in a relatively humiliating and unnecessary scene, and then be saddled with a schizophrenic brother in a strand of the film that seems distinctly "off." Liam Neeson, as a widower, has no role except to steer his young son through his first crush on a girl. Crime novelist Colin Firth seems to have stepped out of another Curtis film, as he makes a public and potentially humiliating declaration of love after a desperate, Christmas Eve airplane flight. All in all, a waste of time and talent.

Underscoring the fantasized character of the work is the scene in which Hugh Grant's post-Blair prime minister tells the unpleasant, thuggish American president (Thornton) at a press conference that Britain will no longer be bullied by the US. He is prompted to make his nationalist outburst not by any sudden surge in principles, however, but by the sight of the American leader making a pass at his "tea lady." Apart from this ridiculous episode, Grant is generally entertaining. Whether anyone approves of the fact or not, he is a fine comic actor.

If it gives some hint as to the social layer that provides inspiration for the film and Curtis's work in general, one might note that three of the four central male figures (except Neeson, who has no love interest)

face entanglements with social *subordinates*—Grant with his tea lady, Alan Rickman with his secretary and Firth with his cleaning woman.

*Intolerable Cruelty* by the Coen brothers, Ethan and Joel, is a more consistent and pleasing work, concerning the state of American marriage and divorce among the moneyed. Ruthless and successful divorce lawyer Miles Massey (George Clooney) takes the case of a multimillionaire whose adultery has been caught on video. Massey, endowed with marvelous white teeth and the author of a legally unbreakable prenuptial agreement, lives by this creed: “Struggle, challenge and the ultimate destruction of your opponent—that’s life.” He manages to cheat the “betrayed” wife, Marilyn (Catherine Zeta-Jones), a conniving and cash-hungry adventuress, out of the fortune she had counted on. Marilyn plots revenge and gets it, more or less.

The starting point of the script is that love and marriage among the wealthy in America resemble something Balzac would have recognized without difficulty. Matrimony and its dissolution are about joining, seizing or protecting assets. Without a prenuptial agreement, which characters persist in ripping up in the heat of the amatory moment, the wealthy individual is in the most dangerous of positions. “You’re exposed!” is the most terrifying phrase one can hear.

Clooney also happens to be a fine comic actor. Particularly memorable are the scenes in which he is beckoned by the ancient and monstrous founder of the firm, Herb Myerson (Tom Aldredge), who is apparently kept alive only by the alarming tubes coming out of his chest and the unbridled lust for money. Miles is manifestly terrified, but impressed.

It would probably be just as well for the filmmakers and audiences alike if the Coen brothers were to keep their acerbic sights set on the upper echelons of society, whom they reasonably and amusingly enough portray as a gang of criminals and incompetents, rather than treat the rest of the American population, about whose lives and concerns they largely haven’t a clue. *Intolerable Cruelty* is vastly preferable, in my view, to the “darkly comic” *Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, *The Big Lebowski* and such.

*The School of Rock* is another weak film by Richard Linklater (*Slacker*, *Dazed and Confused*, *The Newton Boys*). It follows on the heels of the disappointing *Tape*

and *Waking Life*. The new film concerns a journeyman musician, short of cash, who stumbles into a job as a substitute teacher and sets about turning his class into a rock and roll band. The film’s anti-establishment credentials are of a thoroughly insipid and harmless variety. Jack Black puts a good deal of energy into the role, but that can’t save a film whose idea of “open revolt” is sincere devotion to a previous decade’s popular music.

*The Matrix Revolutions*, directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski, is the third part in the “Matrix” trilogy. It concerns a final battle waged by humans against all-powerful machines. The work is incomprehensible unless one has studied or remembers the others. And why should anyone not with far too much time on their hands choose to do that? The dialogue is risible, full of pseudo-Zen profundity (“Everything that has a beginning has an end,” “No one can see beyond a choice they don’t understand”) and characters with names like “The Oracle,” “The Architect,” “Bane,” “Deus Ex Machina [seriously!]” and so on. A spectator might be forgiven for asking him or herself from time to time, is this a parody? Alas, no.

One may forgive Keanu Reeves (as the all-too-Christlike Neo), Carrie-Anne Moss and Laurence Fishburne for taking this stuff so seriously or appearing to, but film history probably will not. One only trusts that some of those who made vast and overextended claims for the first part of the trilogy have been awakened to reality by this latest nonsense, with any luck by the sound of their own howls of laughter.



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