The slight and the reprehensible

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Something's Gotta Give, written and directed by Nancy Meyers; *The Last Samurai*, directed by Edward Zwick, written by John Logan, Zwick and Marshall Herskovitz

In *Something's Gotta Give*, Jack Nicholson plays Harry Sanborn, a 63-year-old hip-hop record label owner who has a penchant for much younger women. His current girl friend, Marin (Amanda Peet), invites him to spend a weekend at her mother's beach-house in the Hamptons on Long Island. The couple is surprised by Marin's divorced mother, Erica (Diane Keaton), a playwright, and aunt, Zoe (Frances McDormand), and awkwardness ensues. The same evening, Harry suffers a heart attack and, on doctor's orders, ends up staying at the beach-house alone with Erica under her extremely reluctant care.

Unsurprisingly, the two develop feelings for one another, Erica overcoming her self-imposed isolation, and Harry his aversion to women more or less his own age. While Marin gracefully drops out of the picture, Harry's doctor, Julian (Keanu Reeves), a much younger man, begins to woo her playwright mother. When Harry seems to hesitate after his return to the city, Erica pours her broken heart into a play comically based on their misadventures and turns to the young and handsome doctor. Harry goes off to search his soul, and after six months, comes looking for Erica. A surprise lies in store. And then another surprise. Except there's nothing surprising about either twist.

The film is dangerously slender and predictable, the happy ending apparently unavoidable. One can see the latter coming from a considerable distance, but one is helpless to do anything about it.

Keaton and Nicholson have their moments. As lively human beings, they inevitably bring something to any film project. Most of the slight amusement, however, takes place in spite or outside of the script, which is banal in the extreme.

These things are done so carelessly and thoughtlessly. Meyers, previously responsible as a director for Disney's *The Parent Trap* (1998) and *What Women Want* (2000), has Keaton's character described as the most important American playwright "since Lillian Hellman." Whatever one thinks of Hellman, nothing could be less likely. Indeed hardly anything about the character suggests a writer, even of pet-food commercials. Nor would one be convinced for an instant that the Nicholson character is associated with rap music. Why these and other silly and implausible details? As though a comedy could just be thrown together in any old fashion.

There are things to be said about aging and its peculiarities in contemporary society, about middle-aged male fantasy, about middle-aged female frustration and defensiveness, but they're largely not to be found here. The film, a market product, lacks incisiveness at every point. In fact, *Something's Gotta Give*, one might say, is nothing so much as congealed lack of edge.

Edward Zwick's *The Last Samurai* manages to be both laughable and reprehensible. One is tempted to ignore the latter quality because the work is so unconvincing, tedious and clichéd, but even risible films have their harmful consequences.

Captain Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise) is a guilt-ridden veteran of the Indian wars, or massacres, in the 1870s, hired by the Japanese government to train its imperial armed forces for a war against the last-remaining band of samurai warriors, discontented remnants of a feudal age. In the first encounter between the unprepared government forces (Algren has argued against engaging the enemy) and the samurai rebels, the imperial army is routed and the American captured.

The bulk of the film takes place in the village ruled by the samurai chieftain Katsumoto (Ken Watanabe). Algren resides with the widow of a man he killed

during the brief battle and her two small sons. Gradually he comes to understand and value "the way of the warrior," learning a little Japanese and training himself in their martial methods. Naturally, feelings develop between the young widow and the battle-scarred American.

The platitudes, some delivered in the form of a voice-over narration by the Algren character, come thick and fast. "They are an intriguing people," says the knowing voice. "From the moment they wake, they devote themselves to the perfection of everything they do." Other Algren comments: "There is some comfort in the emptiness of the sea" and "I am beset by the ironies of life." The exchanges between the infinitely wise, brave and compassionate Katsumoto and Algren are particularly prone to pithy wisdom. Katsumoto: "Do you believe a man can change his destiny?" Algren: "I believe a man does what he can until his destiny is revealed." The samurai leader knowingly (and metaphorically) contemplates the cherry-trees: "A perfect blossom is a rare thing!" And so forth. The film lasts a very, very long time, or seems to.

The genuinely unpleasant aspect of the film is its unashamed reveling in war and bloodshed. The only bright spot in Edward Zwick's filmography is *Glory* (1989), an account of the activities of the Civil War's first black regiment. Although a bloody battle climaxes the film, one hardly remembers the war scenes. That work was concerned with a social problem and a remarkable history. Fourteen years later, *The Last Samurai* is obsessed with gratuitous and graphic violence.

Zwick's film idealizes the "noble savage" and denigrates modern society not from the point of view of a serious critique of capitalism, but in a misanthropic, right-wing populist manner. Everything modern is amoral, impure and without honor. Upheld as the values to live by: duty, service, submission to one's superiors. This is a film that casts in a positive light Algren's transformation from drunken malcontent to a kneeling servant of Japan's divine ruler. What goes on?

The notion that the samurai's *bushido* represents a moral or social principle to live by is more than dubious. The real history with which Zwick's film only toys is revealing.

When the feudal system and the privileges of the samurai class were officially abolished in 1871 by the emperor, the former warriors found themselves in a difficult predicament. Many did not know how to make a living. Some thousands gathered in 1876-77 under the leadership of Saigo Takamori, upon whom the character of Katsumoto is obviously based. (Zwick notes that the Saigo's "beautiful and tragic fate became the point of departure for our fictional tale.") Saigo had been a commander of the imperial forces, and became a state councillor and army general in the new state. He disagreed, however, with the modernization of Japan and its new relationship with the West.

One of Saigo's chief concerns was that Japan annex Korea before another power realized that country's potential. It was over that rather sordid, material issue—which, needless to say, goes unmentioned in the film—that he resigned and eventually launched his revolt. In 1877, leading 40,000 samurai rebels, Saigo suffered defeat at the battle of Satsuma at the hands of 60,000 government troops, armed with modern military hardware and know-how, and committed suicide. To make a model out of such a figure...?

To glorify militarism, warrior-like ferocity and subservience has no positive content to it at this moment in history. The bloodbaths in *The Last Samurai*, on the one hand, serve to divert attention from the fact that the filmmakers have little of interest or insight to say. On the other, they seem to be feeding off quite nasty and disoriented, if only partially conscious, moods in the American upper middle class.