

Waitress and Mr. Brooks: Somewhere in America...

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Waitress, written and directed by Adrienne Shelly; *Mr. Brooks*, directed by Bruce A. Evans, screenplay by Evans and Raynold Gideon

Only a few months before her film *Waitress* was accepted by the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, 40-year-old American director Adrienne Shelly was tragically murdered in New York City, a victim of the desperate state of social relations in the US. Her demise casts a pall over the sweet but limited comedy in which Shelly, a talented performer, plays one of the main characters.

The film, the director's third, centers on Jenna (Keri Russell), a working-class girl from a small Southern town, trapped in an unhappy marriage. Jenna, together with Becky (Cheryl Hines) and Dawn (Shelly), works at a blue-collar diner—reminiscent of the setting for the television situation comedy *Alice*. Pies are the specialty of the house, and Jenna is the “pie-genius” who invents a new one every day.

Although Becky and Dawn have their own problems, they consider themselves lucky compared to Jenna, whose insecure, possessive husband Earl (Jeremy Sisto) is suffocating and abusive. Besides being sustained by her female friends, Jenna has a bond with the cantankerous owner of the diner, Old Joe (Andy Griffith).

Hiding her intentions from Earl, a now-pregnant Jenna prepares to enter a pie-baking contest offering a large cash prize—and therefore the possibility of escaping her spouse. After Earl gets wind of the plan and goes berserk, Jenna plods on in quiet, submissive desperation—concocting “*The-I-hate-my-husband pie*”—until the arrival in town of a young gynecologist, Dr. Pomatter (Nathan Fillion).

In their first encounter as doctor and patient, Pomatter “uncongratulates” Jenna for a pregnancy that she admits to only enduring because it's not the unborn child's fault that she's a hostile mother-to-be. (“I don't need no baby. I don't want no trouble. I just want to make pies. That's all I wanna do. Make pies.”)

As both are married, Pomatter and Jenna try to resist each other, but eventually embark on a torrid affair. (The scenes of Jenna stiffly lecturing Pomatter—“What kind of doctor are you?”—then throwing herself at him are amusing.) He is as much attracted to her confections, made “with a heart in the middle,” as to her soulful sadness. She, on the other hand, floats through the day in a cocoon of bliss, finding comfort in each 20-minute embrace “without an ounce of selfishness to it.” When push comes to shove, however, she is clear that the doctor is not her salvation.

Jenna exorcises her guilt about viewing the child as “an alien and a parasite” by writing letters to “a baby such as yourself.” In a fairly predictable twist, Jenna turns her life around with more than a little help from Old Joe.

Waitress has a whimsical feel and an “out of time” look: it takes place at some point somewhere in the South. The movie is partially rescued from tonal and emotional unevenness by Russell's straightforward approach and Hines's considerable skills. Driven by conflicting impulses, the film is never quite sure how far into the dark side it wants to venture. In particular, its attempt to keep the comedic spirit alive while Earl is persecuting Jenna is strained. Despite the character's zigzags, Sisto as Earl does a fine job with a difficult role.

The movie's signature is the pies, their creation organized in a highly stylized manner. As a distinctly visual presentation—blazing in eye-popping color—they are Jenna's inner life materialized and, therefore, set the mood for the film. The “*I-don't-want-Earl's-baby pie*,” and the “*I-can't-have-no-affair-because-it's-wrong and I-don't-want-Earl-to-kill-me pie*,” and the “*Pregnant-miserable-self-pitying-loser pie*” fill in the dramatic blanks.

Although somewhat precious and unchallenging, the film is undeniably imaginative. Shelly dreamed up the film for very specific reasons: “I wrote *Waitress* when I was about eight months pregnant, and I was really scared about the idea of having a baby. I couldn't imagine how my life was going to be, that it would change so drastically that I wasn't even going to recognize myself anymore. I was terrified and I really had never seen that reflected in anything, not in a book or in a movie.”

In addition to dramatizing these concerns, Shelly wants an engagement with working-class life. This engagement, however, is largely superficial. But what most detracts is the fashion in which the filmmaker stacks the decks against her male characters: Earl is a lout, Ogie exists on the border between solicitous and obnoxious, and Becky's off-screen husband is a life-sucking invalid.

More seriously, Dr. Pomatter, to the extent that he is developed as a character, preys on Jenna's vulnerable state. He is an offending husband who, unlike Jenna, seems to have no good reason for being unfaithful. *Waitress's* feminist bent encourages a certain self-pity and self-involvement, promoting the delusion that independence from a bad husband or, in fact, from the whole male gender leads to empowerment. Poverty and low wages then just

melt away. The diner is transformed magically from drab to Land-of-Oz-like.

In 1973, a period when artists were more audacious in their social criticism, German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder spoke in an interview about his interpretation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, a play in which the lead character walks out in the end on her soul-destroying marriage: "I made it quite clear that I didn't see it as a question of a woman's emancipation, which is the way the play is conventionally read. All the people in the play, including Nora, need to gain their freedom...."

"I'm often irritated by all the talk about women's liberation. The world isn't a case of women against men, but of poor against rich, of repressed against repressors. And there are just as many repressed men as there are repressed women.... You can criticize a set-up like that rather than simply saying a person is free to leave, because people are *not* really free to walk out."

The most recent American serial killer movie is Bruce A. Evans's *Mr. Brooks*, and it is one of the most preposterous. Earl Brooks (Kevin Costner), a wealthy box manufacturer, is the Portland, Oregon, Chamber of Commerce's Man of the Year. As well as being a leading citizen, he is an artist (a nice touch!), a loving husband to wife Emma (Marg Helgenberger) and adoring father to teenager Jane (Danielle Panabaker).

But this model citizen has a small flaw...he is addicted to serial killing, a problem he attempts to address by attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and reciting the "Serenity Prayer" ("God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the Courage to change the things I can, and the Wisdom to know the difference," etc.). A meticulous killer, Brooks tussles with his conscience in the form of conversations with Marshall (William Hurt), his imaginary alter ego invisible to the rest of humanity.

Brooks, dubbed "The Thumbprint Killer," slips up when a double homicide he commits is witnessed by an aspiring serial killer, Mr. Smith (Dane Cook). Smith proceeds to blackmail Brooks, but not with the usual monetary demands. Instead he wants to become Brooks's serial killer sidekick!

Meanwhile, in hot pursuit is Detective Tracy Atwood (Demi Moore), a *multimillionaire* cop who is in the middle of a nasty divorce from a gold-digging, playboy husband. (Brooks and Smith help her out on that score.) Then, when daughter Jane drops out of college leaving behind a murdered classmate, Brooks suspects that he has transmitted the serial killer gene to his offspring.

Unfortunately, *Mr. Brooks* takes itself and its lead character far too seriously to be called a black comedy. It is slick looking, and Costner delivers a competent performance. Hurt, who hams it up, is an irritant—and an unnecessary plot device.

Most offensive is the film's adulation of wealth. A certain layer in American society, with a healthy representation in Hollywood, simply cannot help itself. Such people are in awe of wealth and power. They do nothing 24 hours a day but fantasize about such things. It distorts and often, as in this case, makes their efforts empty and ridiculous.

Death is entirely unreal here. What about the misery and suffering Brooks inflicts? The filmmakers show little interest or concern. This is a common characteristic of the latest wave of serial killer films. A recent article in Britain's the *Independent*

noted: "Serial killer movies are often disingenuous. The filmmakers don't want to acknowledge that they are making exploitation pics and, therefore, pretend that their work has a serious sociological purpose."

Rather than *critically* connecting the protagonist's serial-killing psychosis to his brutality and ruthlessness in business, through black comedy or some other means, *Mr. Brooks* essentially expresses admiration for his "success" in both arenas. Says Evans in the film's production notes: "We always thought of him as a man who has a genius for reading other people, who is always the smartest guy in the room. It's what makes him so successful as a businessman and as a husband—that he knows what other people are thinking."

Evans has obviously not spent much time in the company of America's business leaders. To imagine that making wealth in the US recently has been the product of "genius," at reading people or any other activity, is simply deluded. One would like to think that Evans is pulling our leg, but one fears this is not the case.

The director goes on: "And it's this same skill that makes him so successful as a killer. He can read his victims and he can read the police investigators and he's always one step ahead of everybody, which is part of the feeling to which he's addicted."

Detective Atwood, the worthy opponent of this superman, can presumably match wits with him because she too is rich and, therefore, as Evans puts it, is "almost equal in her ability to perceive people's desires and fears." In other words, she's the second-smartest person in the room. *Mr. Brooks* seems to work along the same lines as the media when it implies that the corporate elite functions best when it is showered with cash or that politicians with massive bank accounts can't be bought. All this makes what would have been only an absurd film a downright distasteful one.

At any rate, why only go part of the way? Why not a thriller in which every significant character is a multimillionaire? A multimillionaire murderer dispatching multimillionaire victims, multimillionaire police investigators looking into the crime, multimillionaire journalists covering the event, a multimillionaire judge presiding over the trial, multimillionaire jury members deciding the killers' fate, a multimillionaire prison warden and so on. Why be half-hearted? Where are the Hollywood writers and directors truly prepared to live the dream?



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