

Sex and the City: A joyless affair for the most part

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Written and directed by Michael Patrick King

Sex and the City, based on the cable television series, is a largely pointless exercise that appeals to the most uncritical side of its intended audience.

The series, which ran for 94 episodes in six seasons from June 1998 to February 2004, focused on the lives of Carrie Bradshaw, a weekly columnist for a fictional New York City newspaper, and her three friends—Samantha Jones, with a career in public relations; Charlotte York, who works in an art gallery; and Miranda Hobbes, a Harvard-trained lawyer. The episodes revolved around their relationships with men and their “sexually frank” discussions of those relationships. Over the course of the series Carrie had a number of liaisons, most notably with a wealthy financier, known as Mr. Big.

The film, written and directed by Michael Patrick King (a writer, director and producer on the television show), picks up the characters’ lives four years after the series’ finale. Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) and Mr. Big (Chris Noth) remain in a relationship; Charlotte (Kristin Davis) is happily married, with an adopted daughter; Miranda (Cynthia Nixon) is not so happily married and living in Brooklyn; Samantha (Kim Cattrall), the supposed sexual predator, is living with her younger, television actor boyfriend in California.

The tenor of the film is quickly established. Carrie and Big go apartment hunting, preliminary to moving in together, and he winds up agreeing to buy a luxurious penthouse suite obviously costing millions of dollars. The construction of an enormous walk-in closet, to hold Carrie’s collection of expensive shoes, becomes a highlight of the suite’s renovation. The pair agree to marry, in part to allay Carrie’s feelings of economic insecurity and plans for a lavish wedding get under way. However, Big, already divorced twice, develops cold feet.

Meanwhile Miranda’s husband tells her that he’s slept with another woman and she moves back to Manhattan. Samantha finds that she doesn’t have enough time for herself and that she continues to desire other men. Charlotte

becomes pregnant, much to her surprise.

Events unfold more or less as one anticipates. The characters learn or are reminded of the value of love, friendship, forgiveness and, in Samantha’s case, ‘independence.’ The latter leaves her lover with the memorable line, delivered apparently with utter seriousness: “I love you, but I love me more.” On the cable series, Carrie, who provided a narration for each week’s episode, once mused, “The most exciting, challenging and significant relationship of all is the one you have with yourself. And if you find someone to love the you *you* love, well, that’s just fabulous.”

Self-involvement, commercialism and vulgarity are prominently on display here. However, the film’s creators vaguely want to have their cake and eat it too. Carrie is a “writer,” although we see little evidence of it. Her dream is to stage her extravagant wedding ceremony at the famed central branch of the New York City public library on Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street. This is fitting. City officials recently announced that as of 2014, after a \$1 billion expansion of the library system, the landmark building would be renamed in honor of billionaire Stephen Schwarzman.

As this web site noted: “Schwarzman’s only claim to fame is his fabulous wealth. He is the chief executive of the Blackstone Group, the private equity buyout firm that manages tens of billions of dollars in exotic financial instruments that barely existed when the firm was founded in 1985, but have since mushroomed to play a crucial role in the explosive speculative boom that is collapsing, even as Schwarzman’s philanthropy is announced to the world.” (See “New York’s premier library to be renamed for billionaire Wall Street speculator”)

The “city” in both the HBO series and the new film is Manhattan, only one and the third most populous of New York’s five boroughs, or rather a thin slice of Manhattan, that slice which a philistine and arrogant wealthy elite has rendered virtually uninhabitable.

The creators and stars of *Sex and the City* are not to blame,

needless to say, for the growth of massive social inequality and various other malignancies. They bear some responsibility, however, for treating present realities so uncritically and even lovingly. No matter how it's painted, there is nothing attractive about selfishness and social indifference.

Of course, the overall result is a peculiar and somewhat half-hearted one. No doubt various impulses, conscious and unconscious, are at work in the film's production. This is not 1998 and everyone, at some level, must recognize or feel that. The filmmakers introduce a new character when Carrie hires a young black, working class woman from St. Louis (Jennifer Hudson) as her assistant. The attempt to introduce change, and a different social class, into the old formula fails badly. The film's treatment of the assistant feels condescending and her adoption of the same crass consumerism as Carrie and the others is simply distasteful.

It should be noted that when the film becomes nothing more than a large-screen advertisement for various expensive items of fashion, for example, during Carrie's modeling of a series of possible designer wedding gowns or Samantha's shopping spree during which she fills up her Mercedes-Benz with Gucci, Versace and other brand-names, it's unwatchable.

Sex and the City has little to say, including about the subject of male-female relations, which theoretically ought to be its field of expertise. Aside from demonstrating that women can be as chilly and egoistic about sex as men, the film breaks no new ground. It's not "man-hating," or "feminist" or "post-feminist," or anything in particular. The women are as liberated as galley-slaves, utterly dependent on their various relations. We learn nothing in the film about their work, about what they supposedly do most of the day. We see Carrie a few brief times at her computer and Samantha making one call on behalf of her boyfriend/client.

Worse still, perhaps, the film is not amusing, aside from a few clever lines. Humor bears a relation to life. Jokes made by the privileged about their privileged state are not likely to strike the average funny bone. Carrie, on entering the penthouse suite for the first time: "I've died and gone to real estate heaven ... Finding the perfect apartment is like finding the perfect partner." Carrie to Mr. Big: "Don't give me a diamond, just give me a big closet." Such lines are flat and merely induce discomfort.

The attempts at wisdom are no better: "Year after year, twenty-something women come to New York City in search of the two 'L's: labels and love. Twenty years ago, I was one of them. Having gotten the knack for labels early, I concentrated on love."

Sex and the City is both titillating and conformist. For three of the characters at least, conventional love and

marriage apparently bring life's challenges to an end.

Is there anything here at all? Any honest treatment of life makes a contribution. There is nothing inherently uninteresting about a group of women talking about their lives and loves, in an uninhibited fashion. Let's assume the best, that such was more or less the initial motive, or one of the initial motives. If that were all there were to it ... However, inevitably, on such a medium as television, under the reactionary social and political conditions that prevailed in the late Clinton years and the first term of George W. Bush, in a city undergoing an appalling social transformation, there could be no such 'innocent' outcome.

The program became anchored in and confirmed the enormously privileged condition of those producing and creating it, a condition dependent, in the final analysis, on a certain thoughtlessness in the audience.

There is still the human face. Sarah Jessica Parker, who did not grow up in wealthy surroundings, has one. Her pained expressions seem genuine, although out of place in this triviality. There is a shot of her standing in the rain, in the doorway of her old apartment, that rings true. Not much else does.

No one lives as the women in the series and film do. Or no one should have to, at any rate. This unrewarding life centering on shoes and wealth and weight, without culture or charm or genuine warmth, seems joyless and a punishment for the most part. Is it appealing? One suspects that many in the youngish female audience for this film suffer from anxieties of various kinds, and find through viewing and 'adoring' *Sex and the City* a second-hand means of talking back, 'toughly and cynically,' to life, which is insecure and slightly ominous to them.

In any event, there is nothing to be terribly indignant or impressed about here. These have been bad years, and something had to fill them up.



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