

DVD Select: 'Waitress' serves up entertainment

by Robert_J_Hawkins

On the DVD extras of the exquisite little film "Waitress" (Fox, 4 stars), the writer-director-co-star Adrienne Shelly calls her movie a "love letter to Sophie," her young daughter who plays the toddler Lulu near the film's end.

PIE-MAKING GENIUS' - In 'Waitress,' Keri Russell plays a battered wife with a gift for making delicious pies. CNS Photo by Alan Markfield. DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin Even if you didn't know that Shelly was brutally murdered not long after this film was done, the tenderness with which she spoke those words catches you right in the throat.

The romantic comedy is about "pie-making genius" Jenna (a superb Keri Russell) caught between a marriage to a brute, an unwanted pregnancy and a lusty affair with her gynecologist. One of the film's most charming devices is an overhead shot of Jenna making pies with titles that reveal the turmoil in her sub-conscious, like the "I-won't-have-Earl's-baby" pie - a fairly interesting quiche. Moans Jenna very early in the film, as the lines on the home pregnancy test kit turn pink, "I should never drink. I do stupid things when I drink, like sleep with my husband." Nodding in sympathy are her two cohorts at Joe's Pie Shop, the earthy blonde Becky and the ditzy Dawn (Shelly).

Right here, I have to step back and say the film's characters owe a little in spirit to Alice, Flo and Vera who ran the counter at the greasy spoon Mel's in the 1970s sitcom "Alice" (which in turn owed a debt to "Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore"). If Becky had told the cook to "kiss my grits" I wouldn't have been the least bit surprised.

Jenna is a decent gal in a tough situation. Her husband Earl (Jeremy Sisto) fluctuates between needy and abusive with frightening swiftness. She never knows whether to baby him or dodge a hard slap across the face. She was plotting to leave him long before the pregnancy.

The affair with the gynecologist Dr. Pomatter (the boyishly charming Nathan Fillion), well, it just sort of happens. At one point Jenna is writing a letter to her unborn baby, "I hope someday somebody holds you for 20 minutes straight, and that's all they want to do ... without an ounce of selfishness to it." Perhaps Jenna was just looking for her long-overdue 20 minutes.

Jenna's exit strategy involves designing a killer pie for the Jonesville Bake Off, with its \$25,000 first prize. Either that, or sell the baby. Jenna has no maternal instincts to speak of - at least, at first, they are overshadowed by survival instincts.

While Shelly is clearly the brains behind this production - actor after actor marvels at the preciseness of her vision in the writing and directing - it is completely Russell's film. She reveals herself as an actress with uncanny comic timing. She is so charming that nothing she says - and she says a bit - can dampen your ardor for Jenna. You want that girl to win.

Or at least dump Earl and go on to be a loving mom and pie-making genius. The one person who sees the inner beauty and possibilities of Jenna is the shop's crotchety owner Joe, played with an ageless wisdom and impishness by Andy Griffith.

With such a fine blend of characters, story and talent falling in love with "Waitress" is as easy as, well, pie.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Paprika" (Sony Pictures Classic, 3.5 stars) From the brilliant mind of Satoshi Kon ("Tokyo Godfathers") comes a delightfully complex and visually engrossing tale - an animated tale - for adults. I don't think this story could be told any other way, in any other medium. In the not-so-distant future, technologists have developed an experimental machine that can record the dreams of people. The applications are meant to be in the aid of psychiatry; however, someone has stolen one of the machines and is draining away the dreams and recombining them into one massive psychedelic marching reality that grows larger and more encompassing with every dream. Those that lose their dreams - including some of the key scientists - enter a vegetative state. It is up to lead scientist Chiba Atsuko (who enters client's dreams in the guise of the alluring Paprika - both fabulously voiced by Megumi Hayashibara, who may invade my dreams any time she desires) to solve this mystery and resolve the dream drain before it supplants reality. My gosh, I wish I could do this justice.

"The Namesake" (Fox, 3 stars) We are a world of immigrants. And still it is not easy. Even surrounded by loving friends in a foreign land we carry the mark of loneliness, some more than others. Culture and traditions are constant companions - how many to revere or cast off, how many from the new land to adopt? Assimilation. Cultural identity. The Mira Nair-directed "Namesake" based on the novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, explores such themes - and the many layers beneath. It is the story of two generations of the Ganguli family, the first Ashoke (Irfan Khan) and his wife Ashima (Tabu) are first generation migrants to the United States. Their American-born children Gogol (Kal Penn) and Sonia (Sahira Nair) embrace assimilation. It is Penn's sensitively realized Gogol around whom much of the story turns - his early embarrassment with this Old World parents, his rejection of Indian culture, even his name. Gogol's path to rediscovering his heritage and the circumstances behind his name are filled with small miracles, heartbreak and tragedy.

"Vitus" (Sony, 3 stars) It seems like a familiar story, the child genius who wants nothing more than to be a normal child and the grandfather who shows him how he can. The child, Vitus (played by two children at ages 6 and 12), is a piano prodigy whose parents immediately begin to formulate plans for turning him into a star. Vitus' grandfather is played by Bruno Ganz. The 12-yr-old Vitus, Teo Gheorghiu is a bona fide prodigy and performs his own music in the film. What's nice about this take on a familiar story is that the child isn't a horrific handful and the parents aren't wickedly ambitious exploiters. There is family love coursing through difficult times, and the film enjoys a light charm that makes it an admittedly sappy pleasure to watch.

And all the rest, in a very full week of films:

- "The Land Before Time: The Wisdom of Friends" (Universal). The animated dinosaur franchise is still a children's favorite, as this 13th full-length feature attests. Cuba Gooding Jr. and Sandra Oh lead the voice-over cast.

- "Futurama: Bender's Big Score" (Fox) The first feature-length spin-off from the former animated TV series with several more on the way - from the heart and fevered imagination of Matt Groening. The film is the first carbon-neutral release (carbon impact was off-set by mitigation steps, like having trees planted) and includes a cameo by former Vice President Al Gore.

- "Who's Your Caddy?" (Genius Productions) Music mogul C-Note (Antwon "Big Boi" Patton) will do anything to get a membership in an elite country club. A la Rodney Dangerfield in "Caddy Shack"?

- "I Know Who Killed Me" (Sony) It would be too easy to say cheap celebrity and easy booze, since it stars Lindsay Lohan, but apparently that isn't the answer. For those who revel in tragedy, the DVD has an extended scene of Lohan pole dancing in a stripper club.

- "First Snow" (Sony) In this psychological thriller slick salesman Jimmy Starks (Guy Pearce) takes a sudden turn after a psychic tells him his days are numbered.

- "Bratz: The Movie" (Lionsgate) Remember the trashy dolls that stupid parents were buying for their shallow little kids? Now they are a movie, only less trashy to widen the commercial appeal. They set out to make their cliquish high school a better place through song, dance and fashion.

- "Hot Rod" (Paramount) Inspired by Andy Samberg's "Saturday Night Live" bits, the actor plays Rod Kimble, probably the worst stuntman in the world. When his abusive stepfather falls ill, Rod stages a jump over 15 buses to pay for the guy's heart operation. And so they can have another chance to fight.

- "Spice World" (Sony) See "Bratz" (above). This is one week in the reunion tour of the now-Wisteria Lane class Spice Girls pop singing and posing group. All done in good self-deprecating fun, since the reunion concert was fictional.

IT CAME FROM TV

Let's just call it Garry Marshall Third Season Week. Because that's what we're getting from Paramount: Season three of three of classic television's most beloved series, all created by Marshall: "Laverne & Shirley," "Happy Days" and "Mork & Mindy."

Megaset of the week: "The Man from U.N.C.L.E.: The Complete Series." (Time-Life/Warner, 41 DVDs) TV's best darn spy series ever featured the suave and deadly Napoleon Solo (Robert Vaughn) and his Russian sidekick, the ironic Illya Kuryakin in 105 episodes between 1964 and 1968. Not only was the series inspired by the James Bond phenomenon, Ian Fleming actually helped launch the show and came up with the name Napoleon Solo. Copies of his handwritten notes are included in the bonus features. The set also includes the original pilot, titled "Solo," and the spinoff 1966 feature film "One Spy Too Many." The set comes packaged in a metal attache case and is priced at \$250, available at www.manfromuncleddvd.com.

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