DVD Select: A shoestring budget and a stellar performance

by Robert_J_Hawkins

Ed Blum had never directed a feature movie, but he wanted to. So naturally he went to his old schoolmate Aschlin Ditta, who'd never written a movie script, and asked him to work one up. A romantic comedy. Which Ditta did, practically overnight.

'GOOD LUCK CHUCK' - Jessica Alba and Dane Cook star in the romantic comedy 'Good Luck Chuck.' CNS Photo courtesy of Sergei Bachlakov. 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

These cheeky chaps then persuaded some of England's most interesting and desirable actors to work on their movie for equity minimum pay. Among them are Ewan McGregor, Eileen Atkins, Gina McKee, Sophie Okonedo and Hugh Bonneville.

This, of course, when they didn't have a dime to finance the film.

It all worked out though. "Now and again, it's good to just do something," says Blum in the DVD extras.

They struck while the inspiration was hot and moved quickly: The movie was shot for just over $500,000, and they did it all in the time that a big-budget movie uses to pick an on-set caterer.

The movie is called "Scenes of a Sexual Nature" (ThinkFilm, 3 stars), which is both tragically misleading and quite accurate. Yes, the film is little more than a collection of scenes - unrelated vignettes or sketches that take place over a single afternoon in London's sprawling Hampstead Heath, an 800-acre park about four miles from Trafalgar Square. But no, none of them really is sexual in nature.

They're more about relationships - some deeper than others.

The film opens with Jamie (Andrew Lincoln) and Molly (Holly Aird), a married couple sunbathing on the heath. When Molly catches her husband staring at the exposed knickers of an exotic beauty in a summer dress reading Camus (Eglantine Rembauville-Nicolle), she gleefully puts him through the wringer as only a happily married woman could.

There is a woman Anna (Okonedo) who is hit upon by the awkward young Noel (Tom Hardy) moments after she's broken up with her boyfriend. Noel quickly learns that he's "punching above my weight."

McKee and Bonneville, memorable as Hugh Grant's sister and brother in law in "Notting Hill," play a painfully mismatched pair on a blind date that ends - perhaps inevitably - badly.

Sometimes what you see, isn't what you get. Mark Strong and Polly Walker seem to be a high-powered couple, deeply involved and perfectly matched. There's a twist and you see it coming, but a twinge of sadness creeps in just the same. Likewise, Adrian Lester and Catherine Tate are loving parents who also happen to be

celebrating their final divorce decree.

The most charming tales are the least expected. One involves two gay men (McGregor and Douglas Hodge) who enjoy a 15-year relationship that is nonetheless rocky. Their discussion about adopting a child is both tender and a bit heartbreaking.

The other, which plays out over the course of the movie, involves an elderly couple (Benjamin Whitrow and Eileen Atkins) who simply share a park bench but soon discover that they have ties going back 50 years.

The sketches rarely spill over into each other - the socially awkward lout Noel manages to alienate a couple of the other female characters and one chap unknowingly is the catalyst to the breakup of the blind date. Beyond that, these are small consumables - like O. Henry or Nora Ephron short stories. The sum of the parts do not equal a greater whole. But each is delicious in its own way.

ALSO THIS WEEK

A young man asks a total stranger to marry him in the romantic comedy "Wedding Daze"; a guitar-playing car thief and an autistic piano player form a blues band in "Killer Diller"; a young couple snatch a bundle of cash with a heap of woes in the suspense thriller "Love Lies Bleeding"; and a Dane Cook and Jessica Alba try their hand at broad romantic comedy in "Good Luck Chuck."

IT CAME FROM TV

Fox Home Entertainment releases the season-six premier of the offensively funny animated sitcom "Family Guy." In it is a weird homage to the original "Star Wars" movie, titled "Blue Horizon." Stewie is Darth Vader,

in case you missed it.

When John F. Kennedy was killed, American society also experienced the death of its faith in its governing institutions. Nobody buys the "lone gunman" bit. That attitude is explored on the PBS American Experience documentary "Oswald's Ghost" which aired Jan. 14 and is available on DVD.

Also: Season three of "Sabrina, the Teenage Witch"; a new adaptation of Jane Austen's final novel, "Persuasion," from the BBC; season five of "The Rockford Files"; and season two of "SeaQuest DSV."

FROM THE VAULTS

Since its debut in 1993, it has been a given that you cannot fully appreciate the Nora Ephron-directed-and-scripted romantic-comedy "Sleepless in Seattle" without having seen the much older movie, "An Affair to Remember."

Guys, it is a conspiracy to get us to see yet another tear-jerker, one that is a part of the female DNA. To understand the female romantic impulse, you have to see "An Affair to Remember."

If you will remember, in "Sleepless," the women - in particular Rita Wilson, Meg Ryan and Rosie O'Donnell - grow positively weepy over "An Affair to Remember." And eventually Meg Ryan's character Annie Reed agrees to meet Sam Baldwin (Tom Hanks) atop the Empire State Build, just as Deborah Kerr and Cary Grant did in "Affair to Remember."

That is known as the "fateful appointment." It defines a relationship and it rests upon the building block "commitment." When you agree to be there, you've got to show up. Otherwise what you have on your hands is

known as a "romantic tragedy." Also, "destiny" is mixed up in all this but I'm still working that one out. Oh, and "pride." Nothing thwarts fate like pride.

If you're a guy like me, and saw "Sleepless in Seattle" when it first came out, you wondered what the heck that was all about. It took a few years for me to get around to seeing "An Affair." When I did, it all made sense.

No, no. Not the man-woman relationship. Just the movie "Sleepless in Seattle."

So, now's your chance (and maybe later you can pick up some love points before Valentine's Day): "An Affair to Remember" (Fox Home Entertainment, 1957) is being released in a 50th anniversary edition.

Here's the deal, Nickie Ferrante (Cary Grant) is a man of the world sailing back to America to marry ... somebody. On board the ship Nickie meets a former lounge singer Terry McKay (Deborah Kerr), also en route to the altar to marry ... somebody.

It doesn't matter who the somebodies are. These two fall madly in love. You know how these cruise ship things are.

They agree that when they reach land they will put their romantic affairs in order and, if all works out, will meet atop the Empire State Building in six month's time. Do you see now? Fateful appointment, dependent upon commitment. I know for people today the whole six-month cooling-off period is difficult to get your head around.

See, Nickie and Terry know that if they are both up there on the 102nd floor in six months it means they are

meant for each other. Neither one is thinking "Well, if this doesn't work out I can get a divorce in a couple of weeks and be back trolling on match.com in no time."

It was a different world back then, which doesn't mean that women today don't long for that sort of fate-driven commitment. Which is why "An Affair to Remember" is so popular today.

I think.

I'm a guy. Give me some slack.

Without giving away the plot, fate plays a cruel trick on Terry. But just when it looks like the whole world stinks, destiny exerts its powerful mojo. (I think this is where the handkerchiefs come out by the dozens and sniffles fill the theater.)

The 50th anniversary edition of "An Affair to Remember" pays special tribute to Kerr, who died only last October. This new digital transfer includes commentary by vocalist Marni Nixon and film historian Joseph McBride and features on Grant, Kerr, director Leo McCarey and producer Jerry Wald. There are also features on the production, the back story and more.

While "An Affair to Remember" doesn't show up explicitly in another Nora Ephron romantic-comedy gem, "When Harry Met Sally ..." (MGM, 1990), its spirit permeates the film. It is being released this week in a "collector's edition" with a new commentary track by Ephron, director Rob Reiner and co-star Billy Crystal as well as seven newly minted featurettes on the film.

Remember our key points from "Sleepless in Seattle": destiny, fate, commitment, pride. I think Ephron

loaded them all in this movie as well.

As the movie begins, Harry (Crystal) and Sally (Ryan) share a ride home to New York from college. They share nothing else. Harry has a warped perspective on romance and Sally has an overly romanticized one.

Harry says stuff like "Men and women can't be friends because the sex part always gets in the way."

To which Sally observes, "It is amazing. You look like a normal person but actually you are the angel of death."

They go off to their respective romances (with no intention of meeting ever again, much less atop the Empire State Building). Time passes. Romances and marriages fail. Harry and Sally keep bumping into each other.

Bruised and battered in the dating world, they decide that friendship may be a safer alternative after all. They become best friends. They watch their mutual best friends, Marie (Carrie Fisher) and Jess (the late Bruno Kirby) meet and fall in love.

Friendship works for them until, just as Harry predicted, "the sex part" just sort of happens and ruins everything. Well, from Harry's point of view. He bolts.

That would be the end, too. Except destiny intervenes and conquers pride. And women everywhere have a whole other excuse for whipping out the handkerchiefs and having a healthy weep - mixed with a half-pint of Haggen Dazs Rocky Road ice cream.

DVD debut of the week: Writer-director Spike Lee's first feature-length film, "She's Gotta Have It" (MGM, 1986). Shot in 12 days on a $175,000 budget, this comedy about Nola Darling (Tracy Camilla Johns) and her three lovers shook up the movie industry and made Lee one of the hottest properties n Brooklyn.

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