

Movie Review: 'The Nanny Diaries'

by Nina Garin

At 22 years old, Scarlett Johansson has already played everything from a high school outcast ("Ghost World") to a seductive vixen ("Match Point").

But in "The Nanny Diaries," she crosses into totally new territory: super cute.

'THE NANNY DIARIES' - Annie (Scarlett Johansson) and Grayer (Nicholas Art) draw battle lines in 'The Nanny Diaries.' CNS Photo courtesy of K.C. Bailey. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Sure, many already use that term to describe her physically. Or how she's dressed. But when it comes to her film roles, they've traditionally been less Julia Roberts sweet and more Jodie Foster serious.

Until now.

In "The Nanny Diaries," Johansson stars as Annie, an adorable-but-confused college graduate who can't figure out what to do with her future.

Too afraid to follow her heart toward anthropology and too stubborn to go into finance as her mom wants, she instead takes a job working as a nanny for one of Manhattan's richest families.

"Annie is so cute and witty and fun," Johansson said in a recent interview. "I'm from New York, too, and I wanted Annie to feel like a real urban girl. Someone who could be a friend of mine."

And, yes, Annie does feel like your shy-but-cool friend from college, the one who goes with you to all the parties but never has too much to drink.

But at times, Annie also feels like a fairy-tale character.

The movie was adapted from a book - the memoirs of real-life nannies Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus - and follows the story almost too closely.

In the tell-all book, the socialite characters are dubbed Mr. and Mrs. X to protect their identities. But keeping those faux names for the movie only makes its whimsy more glaring.

Overall, "The Nanny Diaries" tends to go a bit overboard with fantasy. Take the scenes in which a magical red umbrella just appears out of nowhere to whisk Annie away.

When it delves into the sociological differences between ultra-rich Manhattanites and everyone else, the film becomes more engrossing and entertaining.

"I grew up in Greenwich Village," Johansson said. "I never had a nanny growing up. My parents were friends with artists, and so I wasn't aware of that whole hierarchy. This nanny thing is a whole new world for me, so it's kind of like I'm discovering it along with the audience."

Perhaps the most revealing discoveries about this Upper East Side lifestyle in "The Nanny Diaries" are the eccentricities of those people making all that money.

Rather than cook or dress or bathe their children, the socialite wives are portrayed as evil ice queens who care more about social clubs than storytime.

And the husbands? They're pudgy, balding, philandering workaholics. (Paul Giamatti plays his role as Mr. X so accurately that he's barely recognizable as himself.)

While these stereotypes could get cartoonish, Laura Linney keeps the film from floating away on that red umbrella by bringing humanity to her character, Mrs. X.

Sure, she demands that Annie arrive 30 minutes early to pick up her son, Grayer (played adorably yet forgetfully by Nicholas Art). And she would rather be at the spa than tend to her son's 104-degree fever.

But like Meryl Streep did in "The Devil Wears Prada," Linney brings a sadness and vulnerability to Mrs. X that isn't as obvious in the best-selling book.

"The character is an archetypal, overbearing, unbelievably horrible boss," Johansson said. "And I think Laura did a really good job making an unbelievably intimidating person seem more sympathetic."

While Johansson admires the work of co-star Linney, she said she never really gets intimidated by the big-name stars with whom she works. It's the directors who make this young actress nervous.

"I see working with other great actors as a privilege," she explained. "But we're all working together, so it's not really intimidating. But with directors, you want to show them that you can play the character and know the lines and adapt to their vision."

One director she seems to have impressed is Woody Allen.

The cerebral director cast her in "Match Point" and "Scoop." And now she's back, filming an untitled movie with him in Barcelona.

"Each film I do with Woody, it seems the more comfortable we get around each other," she said. "I love how his words can be easily manipulated. And as an actor I love the freedom of improvisation. I always look at working with him as an acting exercise."

Taking on the Allen movie, as well as being cast as Queen Mary I of Scotland in the upcoming "Mary Queen of Scots," means Johansson probably won't be doing another Annie-style role in the near future.

So even though "The Nanny Diaries" suffers from being too cutesy, it is a rare chance to have this superstar Hollywood actress feel like your best friend. If only for a few hours, anyway.

A Weinstein Co. release. Director: Shari Springer Berman, Robert Pulcini. Writers: Shari Springer Berman, Robert Pulcini (screenplay); Emma McLaughlin, Nicola Kraus (novel). Cast: Scarlett Johansson, Laura Linney, Paul Giamatti, Alicia Keys, Chris Evans, Donna Murphy, Cady Huffman. Running time: 1 hour, 47 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

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