Movie Review: 'Lars and the Real Girl'

by David_Elliott

Quirky, odd, impish, fey, weird, daffy - the adjectives arrive with wee squeals, eager to describe "Lars and the Real Girl."

'LARS AND THE REAL GIRL' - Lars (Ryan Gosling) leaves church with Bianca (a dummy), his sister-in-law Karin (Emily Mortimer) and his brother Gus (Paul Schneider) in 'Lars and the Real Girl.' CNS Photo by George Kraychyk. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.)

Almost suicidally shy, Lars (Ryan Gosling) is a young recluse, alienated somewhat like a cute lollipop that won't stick to anything. He lost his parents a while back and feels that brother Gus (Paul Schneider) briefly let him down. But Gus is lovingly near (Lars lives in the garage), and so is Gus' warm, outreaching wife, Karin (Emily Mortimer).

Lars can handle his job in a computer cubicle, dresses neatly, is very polite but says little. Gosling is "deep" into him. If ever a cry goes up at the multiplexes for "Young Cal Coolidge," Gosling's the man.

In this film made by Craig Gillespie, Lars sees a sex doll being ogled on a computer by an office mate. He discreetly orders one for himself, life-sized, a brunette with wistful eyes and romance-novel lips. The story premise is that Lars develops a shy crush on her, but never (apparently) has sex with her.

He gets into her moods, which really means that she mutely mirrors his. Emotions flicker, both one-sided and oddly mutual. Part of us may yearn for Lars to go nuts and blast her with a popgun, but love runs true.

He names her Bianca (surely no nod to Jagger), and they bond like wax to honey. We fathom, of course, that the surrogate mate is Lars' rescue line, his opening, his plastic Chunnel to the land mass of humanity.

This very dry, ticking comedy requires Gus, Karin and Lars' warmly gentle therapist (Patricia Clarkson) to treat Bianca as real. It's their way of getting to Lars, whose isolation seems rather willful, since everyone likes him. They also like his big doll.

There are no teen creeps to haze Lars about being a baby. The sweet minister does nudge him with First Corinthians 13: "When I was a child, I spake as a child. ..." Lars frequently looks like a grown child who is on to some very private, vaguely dirty joke.

The jokesmith is writer Nancy Oliver of "Six Feet Under." Her work here is softly edgy and unsettling, as if a body snatchers' movie had been crafted by Fred Rogers to star Forrest Gump. Sadly, Lars never sings "Hello, Dolly."

Gillespie faltered with the darkly edgy tone of "Mr. Woodcock." But he maintains a sly, sure tone throughout this. The cast pegs in very neatly, including Kelli Garner as a gawky sweetie who wants Lars.

This may be spot-on, deadpan comedy. Or it may just be another symptom of the infantilizing of movies. The film is like a spaced therapy project where even the doctors are patients and everyone hopes to graduate from Barbie to Bianca.

An MGM release. Director: Craig Gillespie. Writer: Nancy Oliver. Cast: Ryan Gosling, Emily Mortimer, Paul Schneider, R.D. Reid, Patricia Clarkson. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 1/2 stars.

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