

The Rise of the Gentle Romance...



THE *realistic* ROM-COM

WORDS BY RACHAEL SCOTT

In *Jack Goes Boating*, Philip Seymour Hoffman and Amy Ryan give hope to middle-aged romantics everywhere as they, very slowly, get it together. Beno't Poelvoorde and Isabelle Carré—the lovers in December's *Romantics Anonymous*, are so shy of the opposite sex they suffer panic attacks in each other's company before their passion for chocolate calms their nerves. Both films concentrate on gentle romances between couples many would consider socially inept, and are stories far from the romantic ideal Hollywood rom-coms have been shoving down our throats. So is there a new sub-genre of unconventional rom-coms emerging? Dare we hope that romantic comedies are becoming more realistic?

Legions of beautiful people would be out of work if the romantic comedy blueprint changed in any significant way. The average Hollywood rom-com is a vanity driven exercise for actors whose USP is perfection. Jennifer Aniston, Katherine Heigl, Renée Zellweger et al infect the genre like virulent perfect size zero bacteria. You see, all these Hollywood starlets are so precious about the way they are perceived, that looking like a normal person is out of the question. It's hard to imagine Matthew McConaughey developing a nervous cough at the prospect of having sex for the first time, or repeatedly changing his shirt in between dinner courses because he's sweating uncontrollably. Hell, he wouldn't even be wearing one in the first place.

Romantic comedies are wish fulfilment vehicles, designed to take us away from the daily toil life throws at us, but the overused scenario of perfectly formed young adults overcoming a series of deliberately placed obstacles designed to stop them being together, while listening to advice from snarky best-friends before love conquers all is b-o-r-i-n-g. There ARE alternatives. *Crazy, Stupid Love's* cast might not have been whacked with the ugly stick, but this highly entertaining film made a good stab at tackling grown up issues in an extremely humorous way. And culture-clash rom-com *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, where *Sex And The City's* John Corbett is perceived as being more attractive than the film's leading lady Nia Vardalos, remains the biggest box office grossing romantic comedy since its release in 2002.

Despite the impression this article might be giving, I'm a big fan of certain types of rom-com. When I was a little girl, I devoured every film that Doris Day and Rock Hudson performed the will they, wont they mating dance. Woody Allen's comedies are invariably about romantic dilemmas and Richard Curtis' films are rom-com gold. *Bridget Jones Diary* remains one of my favourite films; primarily because it's rooted in reality and I love it when Hugh Grant plays a smarmy git. But why can't rom-coms be realistic? Why do they have to be riddled with incredulous 'As if!' moments? Surely real life is funny enough, without having to invent storylines that involve best friend brides-to-be pulling each other's tiaras off while scrapping on a changing room floor.

Errol Morris documentary *Tabloid* is a classic case of reality turning out stranger than fiction, and proves

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just how hilarious real life romantic scenarios can be. It tells the true story of former beauty queen Joyce McKinney who kidnapped her Mormon boyfriend

Kirk Anderson at gunpoint, drugged him unconscious, manacled him to a bed and forced him to have sex with her. McKinney's undying passion resulted in her narrowly escaping jail-time and in the film McKinney says, "When I met my Kirk, it was like in the movies. Proof, if ever I heard it, that rom-coms are bad for your mental health."

Pretty Woman is possibly the worst offender for pure unashamed fantasy. As enjoyable a film as it is, it left a whole generation of young women believing that if they wear an indecently short skirt and totter through King's Cross station in cripplingly high heeled boots, they'll be rescued from catching a cold and developing bunions by Richard Gere.

The characters in *Jack Goes Boating* and *Romantics Anonymous* aren't the first to stray from the rom-com template, but they do so more spectacularly than most others, apart from possibly Princess Fiona and Shrek who must surely win the award for the oddest of couples who have stuck together through thick, thin and even sequels. No one particularly wants to spend their free time watching unattractive, emotionally challenged weirdos getting it on, but there's a definite need for emotionally challenging stories about romance between people we can relate to on our screens. After all, one woman's misfit is another woman's heart's desire, and you can give me Philip Seymour Hoffman over Richard Gere any day. **S**