

TITLE SEX IN THE NINETIES

ANALYST JOHN AUGUST

AUTHOR Nancy Dowd

DATE 10/20/92

SYNOPSIS

Superagent STEVE BELSON (40) gives a eulogy for Tommy Strong, who was a famous Hollywood agent. Screenwriter CATHERINE BELL (35) sheds a tear. Producer HARVEY FINSTER (38) offers a handkerchief. JOE DONOVAN, tallest man in the Writer's Guild, arrives late with his Asian bride. At home, Catherine and Harvey turn on the TV to see how they looked at the funeral. Harvey says he's doing Joe Donovan's next picture: REDEEMED, another sequel in the "Doak" series of bloody action flicks à la RAMBO. Catherine finds the violence nauseating and disparages Donovan, whom she's never met or even seen. The first draft of REDEEMED is horrible. Harvey convinces Global Pictures president MALCOLM BERGEN to let Catherine rewrite it, adding a "humanistic" touch. Harvey then begs Catherine to do the rewrite, against her better judgment.

Original writer Joe Donovan, who is also supposed to direct the Doak film, wants to drop star SONNY CARLOTTA in favor of an actor who is polysyllabic. Harvey tells Joe the script is being "polished," but won't tell him who is doing it. Joe goes ballistic, smashing the furniture in his house. He sweet-talks Harvey's secretary into telling him that Catherine is the re-writer. He harasses Catherine on the phone. She calls his script rubbish. On the TV, we learn that Global Pictures is threatened by a takeover from reclusive billionaire Walter Simmons, who has never been photographed.

Joe arrives at Catherine's house, pretending to be "Ed Luckner" with Worldwide Investments. He wants to buy her house. They talk. They flirt. Joe is charming. Catherine tells him how awful the script is that she's rewriting. He "accidentally" leaves his briefcase. When she opens it, she finds out he is "actually" billionaire Walter Simmons. He asks her out to dinner, and lets slip his "secret life" as a billionaire. Joe calls and harasses her again. He then arrives as Walter, with flowers. They go for a drive to the beach. Catherine is getting tired of being a screenwriter, and wants to write novels. Just maybe he's starting to fall for her. At dinner the next night, Catherine scribbles of list of all of Hollywood's dirty laundry. She and Joe/Walter share a laugh. He leaves suddenly when Harvey arrives.

As Catherine begins working on the rewrite, she starts to like what she reads. She tells Joe/Walter that she doesn't want to change a thing in the script. They go to the doctor for an AIDS test. On the radio, it is announced that Walter Simmons will make a public announcement, thus blowing Joe's cover. On the Western set at the studio, Joe tries to tell Catherine the truth, but is interrupted. And again at the restaurant, when Harvey comes in. Harvey recognizes Joe's game, and corners him.

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At her house, Joe and Catherine kiss, but Harvey arrives and lets out the secret. Catherine is furious. She rewrites REDEEMED, making it warm, caring and pathetic. And a tremendous hit. Outside the screening, Catherine and Joe meet again. At the Academy Awards, Catherine and Joe are awarded for best screenplay. Joe tells her he loves her. They rush off stage. Harvey and the others take credit while Joe and Catherine make love.

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COMMENTS

Somewhere, in a parallel universe, THE PLAYER was never made, and SEX IN THE NINETIES is a completely novel satire of Hollywood and its foibles. No one has seen the kind of backstabbing and ass-kissing that make this town work, complete with ego battles and mind games.

Unfortunately we cannot change the space-time continuum, and this very funny look at Hollywood comes just a little too late. Although SEX covers much of the same terrain as Altman's film, it's a considerably cheerier story, and perhaps more commercial. THE PLAYER grafted a dark story (a Dostoevsky-style murder) to a skewering send-up of the studio system. SEX is a love story at heart, with the various Hollywood conceits serving primarily as hurdles on the track to consummating the relationship.

Like any comedy, the script lives by its characterizations, which are very good. Screenwriter Catherine Bell is bitchy on the surface and a romantic at heart. Harvey is a lovable putz. Tough guy Joe Donovan realizes he's been playing a character all his life. Dialogue is similarly excellent. The characters are so frantic they simply can't talk about one thing at a time, and instead juggle multiple conversations about wholly unrelated subjects. The script teeters on becoming a door-slamming farce, yet maintains a firm enough hold on reality to keep from spinning off into space.

The structure only grows repetitive when Joe keeps calling Catherine back, harassing her. The story needs either a better motivation for his continued harangues, or a change of the setups for these calls (cellular phones, a call at the office, etc.)

Given this strong recommendation, it is sad to have to pass on this script, at least at the present time. While the market may always accept another romantic comedy, it seems premature to unleash another scathing Hollywood parody. In several years the time may come, but for now it may be better to stay back and let THE PLAYER's trampled grass recover.

PASS (qualified)