

2009 BIGPOND® ADELAIDE FILM FESTIVAL

FESTIVAL DIRECTOR EXPLAINS HER PASSION FOR ROMANTIC COMEDIES

Romantic comedy is one of the world's most beloved genres - when these films are good, I absolutely love them. But, as with anything popular, the Rom Com is often looked down on and frequently underrated.

This year at the 2009 BigPond Adelaide Film festival we are celebrating the romantic comedy with a strand entitled: Rom Coms – Not Just For The Ladies....

As a genre, romantic comedies don't just encompass the formulaic, second-rate movies that carry the derogatory label "Chick Flicks", the films we see being released with predictable regularity.

At their best these films are delightful, even if we know in the end all will be well and they will kiss! And the reality is that romantic comedy isn't a genre just for women, it's for anyone who enjoys good filmmaking and the exquisite agonies of falling in love. Let's expand our idea of what a rom com is and can be – and share the love!

Without doubt, the best rom coms are not about a passive gorgeous girl waiting to be swept off her feet by a manly man – instead they are about two people attracted to each other both physically AND mentally - and using whatever cunning means possible to secure the affections of the other – a battle of the sexes in the most entertaining way possible.

Equally, romantic comedies are not just the story of star crossed lovers finding each other but an insight into so much more. Comedy has always been a way of dealing with material which couldn't be openly addressed.

Look at Shakespeare – even in something as grim as *Titus Andronicus* (think revenge drama with hero feeding the evil Matriarch a tasty meat pie made from her sons) he slips in a laugh – putting us at our ease, thus making the nasty surprises even more effective!

Film didn't invent the romance genre - theatre, novels, poetry were all there before it. Shakespeare again, with his wonderful romantic comedies: *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *All's Well That Ends Well* – all of which have stood the test of centuries and still remain hugely popular and accessible to all.

We see regular film adaptations of Jane Austen's novels, whose savage wit skewered class pretension, and who wrote exclusively within the genre of romantic comedy.

Yet because it is such a popular medium, film does seem to have taken romance in the direction of comedy more than these other media. Love and stories of overcoming obstacles to its fulfillment, are popular themes. Commercial filmmakers, in their quest to please audiences, quickly gravitated towards feel-good stories such as the rom com.

Certain actors and couples come to mind immediately when you think of the genre: Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, Rock Hudson and Doris Day, and closer to our own day, stars like Hugh Grant, Colin Firth and Renee Zellweger spring to mind as specialists at falling in love.

As we thought about our favourite romantic comedies of all time, we found the list dominated by the nation that has consistently delivered the pleasures and perils of falling in love to its audience – America.

Traditionally for Hollywood, SEX was taboo. How could one both explore one of our favourite subjects and still pass the censors? Romantic comedy was a way of flirting with the representation of erotic attraction and possibility, turning it into a game – and finding through the process an eager and wide audience. To this day in America, the rom com allows us to explore the trials and tribulations of falling in love. Some of my favourite recent comedy films from the States – *The 40 year Old Virgin*, *Knocked Up* and *Juno* - all fall within the genre. Both blokes and chicks love these ones!

A comedy like *Knocked Up* shows the way that rom com can be added to almost any kind of story to produce something fresh and accessible to a wide mix of people. Adding a romance to the stoner comedy provided something for just about everyone.

Wall-E recently suggested the possibilities for a love story between robots, providing something to keep both kids and adults interested. In a similar way *Slumdog Millionaire* puts romance together with an analysis of poverty in India, and in doing so, draws in a whole new audience for its socially relevant themes.

As a common response to anxiety, comedy is perhaps one of the most elegant ways to deal with some of life's most difficult moments. Clearly, anxiety about sexual attraction hasn't decreased (and probably never will!) Once you have actually met, the process of getting together with Mr or Ms Right is both thrilling and excruciating, often involving complex game playing – being cool, playing hard to get, not returning calls – whilst simultaneously being unable to think about anything or anybody else. The best of times and the worst of times.

Romantic comedies provide a safe framework for people to deal with the whole messy, problematic business of finding and keeping a mate, but in a context where they are generally assured of a happy ending. Anxiety is thereby converted into pleasure. In a film like *MANHATTAN* (USA, 1979), written and directed by the ever neurotic Woody Allen, one never actually gets away from the anxiety. This anxiety is what ultimately stops a happy ending for Woody's character. Ultimately, *MANHATTAN* is not just a love affair between two, or even three people (with Diane Keaton playing the romantic foil and Meryl Streep the ex-wife turned lesbian), but a love affair with a city, and this beautifully shot film makes everyone want to go to New York at least once in their lives. A true celebration of a metropolis with a soundtrack by George Gershwin, this is a film that can't fail to exhilarate.

As many rom coms are consumed by couples on dates, they gain an additional immediacy and even realism, dramatising something that their audiences are involved in, even while they are watching the film. With this in mind we decided to screen MANHATTAN on the huge screen at the Wallis Gepps Cross Drive In, (the perfect place to enjoy romance with the one you love!). So close to Valentines Day, it's a chance to watch a classic film, and to canoodle in the privacy of your car.

Hollywood films typically contained two plots during the studio era: a romance and some other type of goal-oriented activity. This was in the assumption that films needed to contain elements that simultaneously appealed to as many different audience segments as possible.

So THE APARTMENT – one of the finest films ever made on any measure – is not just a funny and poignant story of two people falling in love – wonderfully played by Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine at the peak of their powers. Simultaneously it is an exploration of the souring of the American dream, the anonymous desperation of corporate life, and the moral bankruptcy that can come with power.

The path of romance here is littered with betrayal, desperation and lies. THE APARTMENT swept the Academy Awards in 1960 and showed that romantic comedy could have a serious and dark edge to it. And, as with any great film, THE APARTMENT has as much resonance and relevance for our audience today.

The golden era of Hollywood screwball comedies in the late 30s, 40s and 50s produced some of the greatest films of all time. In the shadow of the Great Depression, these fast paced, inventive films often explored the class and gender divide – the bureaucracy was broken - all bets were off, women were taking the lead, you could be whoever you wanted to be.

We've previously screened some wonders from this era: in 2007 we screened HIS GIRL FRIDAY starring Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant. (For those West Wing buffs amongst you, I think this film is ripe for a remake starring Alison Janney [CJ] playing against the Cary Grant of the 21st century George Clooney) In 2005, the AFF brought you SOME LIKE IT HOT (Billy Wilder, US 1959) starring Marilyn Monroe, Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon – the latter both in drag. Talk about a film experimenting with gender!

This year, we've chosen to screen THE PHILADELPHIA STORY (George Cukor, US, 1940). Society couple C.K. Dexter Haven (Cary Grant) and Tracy Lord (Katharine Hepburn) have divorced and she is about to remarry. But how can anyone divorce Cary Grant? He arrives with a brilliant plan to undermine the proceedings. So does Macaulay Connor (Jimmie Stewart), scandal sheet hack and working class poet with a chip on his shoulder – adding yet another attractive man in the mix – what is a girl to do?

This is a fine example of what has been called “comedies of remarriage” where a couple who have lost the spark between them, need to rediscover just why they fell in love in the first place.

Philadelphia Story provides an excellent link to our opening night film, *My Year Without Sex*, directed by Sarah Watt (of *Look Both Ways* fame.) Though the couple here lives an everyday Australian suburban life, they have to find out again how to be in love with each other. This story is so familiar to any of us that either grew up here or are raising a

family – how to keep a relationship going with two kids, a mortgage, jobs and middle age looming... In the end it's all about love. It's not often in Australian cinema that we get the rom com right – maybe this very Australian and idiosyncratic film points a direction to our own version of the genre.

Harking back to Hollywood MIDNIGHT, from 1939, is a wonderful romantic farce which updates the story of Cinderella. Claudette Colbert, one of the great romantic comediennes, is down on her luck and adrift in Paris. She finds a fairy godfather to dress her for the ball, but has to consider whether Prince Charming is necessarily her best option.

Of course its not just the Yanks who are obsessed with love – we mustn't forget the French and the British – each approaching romance and comedy in their own idiosyncratic way.

From France we are screening Emanuel Mouret's enormously successful 2008 hit SHALL WE KISS. This gem provides the perfect opportunity for people to break out of the English language and into the universal subject matter of the rom com! Of course, being French, the possibility of infidelity is never far away, and this film plays out the hilarious consequences of giving in to temptation.

From the UK—but with an important Australian connection—we are closing our film festival with the Australian Premiere of Stephan (Priscilla Queen of the Desert) Elliott's wonderfully entertaining EASY VIRTUE. This adaptation of Noel Coward's classic play shows that class distinctions have frequently been at the heart of romantic comedy. The young lord commits the appalling social gaffe of marrying an American (Jessica Biel), which strikes shock and revulsion to the heart of his snooty English family. Stand back and watch the hostilities commence across the class barricades.

Adelaide is a great place to fall in love, but this year's film festival is going to be a great place to enjoy the spectacle and absurdity of love in all of its cinematic forms. Savour its ironies and the way it can be attached to so many other issues. In short, to enjoy the rich variety of ways love still makes the world—and the movies—go around.

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Ten Rom Coms You Should See:

Our Hospitality (1923)

His Girl Friday (1940)

Adam's Rib (1949)

The Seven Year Itch (1955)

The Apartment (1960)

Annie Hall (1977)

Tootsie (1982)

Strictly Ballroom (1992)

Bridget Jones Diary (2001)

Knocked Up (2007)