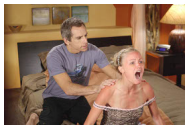

THE HEARTBREAK KID

Outside of a few pornos, I don't think I've ever seen a beautiful actress being treated quite so offensively on-screen as Malin Akerman is in *The Heartbreak Kid*.

In Peter and Bobby Farrelly's updating of 1972's Elaine May-directed, Neil Simon-scripted comedy, Akerman plays Lila, a budding environmentalist with a sweetly flirtatious charm. She falls in love with Eddie (Ben Stiller), a 40-year-old sporting-goods salesman and classic commitment-phobe, and after Eddie panics when Lila's job threatens to take her overseas, the two impulsively marry. They go to Cabo for their honeymoon, Lila becomes badly sunburned, and while she's laid up in their hotel room, a disenchanted Eddie begins a tentative affair with Miranda (Michelle Monaghan), a woman he meets on the beach. Though the movie goes to great lengths to deny this, Eddie is routinely horrible to Lila, but amazingly, this is nothing compared to the abuse she receives from the Farrelly brothers.

As one of the duo's patented romantic gross-outs, *The Heartbreak Kid* is unsurprisingly on the side of Eddie - in the Farrelly
oeuvre,
female characters exist only to be worshipped or feared - and the filmmakers' conceit here is that Eddie and Lila, having rushed into wedlock, turn out to be a terrible match. Yet for the rest of the film's plot to work, Eddie can't be even partially to blame for this (God forbid Stiller should come off as unsympathetic), so after initially presenting Lila as a dreamy sweetheart, the Farrelly brothers start turning her into a nightmare.

They begin by posing Lila as completely annoying: She sings along with the radio, nonstop, during the drive to Cabo; her deviated septum forces liquids to spontaneously burst from her nose; she enjoys loud, acrobatic sex. (Poor Eddie, huh?) Yet Akerman - unfailingly winning on Lisa Kudrow's brilliant HBO series *The Comeback* - is so engaging and comedically confident in these bits that you enjoy Lila even though you're meant to recoil; it's Eddie who looks like an ass for being so put off by her.

Perhaps sensing this, the Farrellys proceed to denigrate Lila further. Her job, it turns out, is strictly volunteer; she has no income, and is deeply in debt. She once had a major cocaine addiction. She refuses, we're told, to trim her pubic hair. And *still* Akerman seems impervious; her line readings have sincerity and surprise - not an easy combo to pull off - and her guilelessness makes Lila seem less deceptive than intensely dizzy, which is hardly a crime. (Unless you're a brazen stick-in-the-mud like Stiller's Eddie.)

So the filmmakers bring out the big guns. Lila not only gets sunburned, but graphically so, complete with protruding blisters and boils. (Bless her heart, at one point Akerman even turns *th is*
to her advantage, with her Noxzema-covered face suggesting a Kabuki warrior.) After Eddie is stung by a jellyfish, Lila proves her environmental know-how by squatting over her husband and peeing on his back, allowing us a close-up of just how unshaven Lila actually is. And, perhaps most offensively, once Lila has served her grotesque purposes, she's dropped from the film entirely; we're not even allowed to see her reaction to Eddie's unfaithfulness - her plight is wrapped up in a line of throwaway dialogue. What has any actress ever done to deserve this cruel a fate? Especially
an actress who has done everything in her power to make a movie
bearable
?

If it's any consolation to Akerman, her battle was unwinnable; in a career of movies ranging from not-bad to less-than-mediocre, *The Heartbreak Kid* is the Farrellys' low point, and by a wide margin. The brothers continue to be visually inept, impart exposition amateurishly - scenes forever begin with clunkers like "So you're an environmental researcher!" and "So when are they sending you to Rotterdam?" - and deliver predictably toothless, relentlessly unamusing gags about women, gays, Southerners, the obese, the elderly, and those of non-Caucasian ethnicity. (Their traditional product-placement mania is also duly accounted for: At a wedding reception, Eddie approaches a table of tykes whose Pepsi cans are artfully arranged, and the only laugh I got from the film was when Eddie, with no irony whatsoever, remarked, "I
love
Subway.")

But in *The Heartbreak Kid*, the Farrellys have even managed the considerable feat of making Ben Stiller seem like the laziest, most egregiously self-serving performer in Hollywood. Scene after scene finds him acting patronizing even to those his character ostensibly
likes
- among them Stiller's real-life dad, Jerry, as Eddie's father, and the usually great Rob Corddry in the Chris Elliott role - and you feel no connection whatsoever between him and Monaghan; Stiller's sardonic affectlessness seems to back up the Farrellys' thesis that everyone in their film

except
Stiller is a total idiot. If the Farrellys really wanted their star to perk up here, they should have cast him opposite a mirror.