

Bon Appétit!: “Julie & Julia” and “(500) Days of Summer”

Written by Mike Schulz

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JULIE & JULIA

I'm not necessarily as confident about this prediction as I was when Heath Ledger's Joker arrived last summer, but if Meryl Streep doesn't win an Oscar for *Julie & Julia*, I'll eat my hat. God knows, after the seeing the movie, I was dying to eat *something*

. A saliva-inducing comedy of gastronomic pleasures, writer/director Nora Ephron's latest is a buoyant and ceaselessly watchable celebration of food and the people who love it, and it offers an utterly sensational performance by Streep, who plays legendary chef Julia Child as a resplendently happy woman who would hungrily devour the entire *world* if she could.

Half of Ephron's picture - the best, I think, she's yet made - is devoted to Child and her husband Paul (a marvelous Stanley Tucci), as the vivacious, 6-foot-2 life force embarks on her culinary career in 1949 Paris. The other half concerns miserable office drone Julie Powell (Amy Adams), who embarks on an unpaid career as a blogger - cooking up 524 Child recipes over 365 days - in 2002 New York. *Julie & Julia* subsequently dovetails between the two stories, and it's to Adams' immense credit that the Julie segments *don't* feel like a serious impediment on the movie. Granted, she's stuck with some tired slapstick (a scene of Julie preparing to boil lobsters lasts at least twice as long as it needs to), and some forced sentiment, and some banal arguments between Julie and her husband (an agreeable but somewhat uninteresting Chris Messina). Yet Adams, as usual, is so unaffectedly winning and emotionally

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present

that she manages to convince you that Powell's journey to professional success, personal contentment, and self-discovery is almost as noteworthy an accomplishment as Child's.

Almost. But it's hardly Adams' (or Ephron's) fault that when Streep's Child is around, you can't imagine wanting to be anywhere else. So full of bonhomie and tireless humor that she doesn't enter scenes so much as enwrap them in an enormous bear hug, and so comfortable in Child's skin that she can lend emotional shading to the simple act of putting on a sweater, Streep is beyond captivating here. (It should also be no surprise that her mimicry of the chef's vocal cadences is uncanny.) When *Julie & Julia* is at its best, your fond feelings for the actress blend seamlessly with your fond feelings for Julia Child herself, and the film's rapturous warmth is all but impossible to resist. The onscreen recipes look decadent and delicious; Streep herself is lip-smackingly good.



(500) DAYS OF SUMMER

"This is not a love story," announces the voice-over narrator in the early minutes of *(500) Days of Summer*

That might be correct in terms of its plot, which recounts the romance and eventual breakup of the seemingly well-matched Tom (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) and Summer (Zooey Deschanel), but as far as I'm concerned, the narrator is also dead wrong. It's just that the love story in question turned out to be between me and the movie, and I'm betting that plenty of viewers will leave feeling that they, too, have fallen for this altogether extraordinary work in a way that goes beyond mere enjoyment or appreciation. In its small-scale way, director Marc Webb's film seems to deliver nothing less than a seismic shift in the romantic-comedy landscape; after years of formulaic, retrograde offerings, here's one that finally feels fresh and truthful and *vital*

, and that achieves its effects through consistently surprising and incisive means.

And

it's funny and touching as hell.

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Although its dialogue is spectacularly wise and witty throughout, the genius of Scott Neustadter's and Michael H. Weber's script lies in its construction, with the film's fragmented narrative exploring a series of days in the leads' 500-day relationship ... yet routinely showing them out of chronological sequence. Viewed as an assemblage of moments, we're given the unique perspective of viewing Tom's and Summer's relationship the way we might look back on our *own* relationships, with a comment on Day 73 echoing one made on Day 15, a fight on Day 154 foretelling one that took place on Day 216, et cetera. Yet rather than being disorienting, this leapfrogging technique clarifies and enhances *(500) Days'* emotional (and comic, and *t ragi* comic) pull, and the filmmakers provide no end of alternately exhilarating and devastating scenes: Tom, after a fight, picking up his phone to call Summer at the exact moment she's staring at her phone, waiting for it to ring; Summer's anguished response to *The Graduate*, portending an end to the couple's romance; Tom's expectations of a rooftop reunion with Summer, presented side-by-side with the heartbreaking reality of the encounter; Tom leading a park-full of strangers in a gloriously spontaneous dance number. (Kudos, by the by, for the best use of Hall & Oates in a movie *ever* .)

Graced with two electrifyingly magnetic and soulful leads, *(500) Days of Summer* is a stunner of an entertainment, insightful and moving and wondrously satisfying. And I've got to say, I'm really enjoying this recent trend at the cineplex. Two Fridays ago, I saw *The Hurt Locker*, which was, at that point, my favorite movie of the year. This past Friday, I saw *(500) Days of Summer*, which is my *new* favorite movie of the year. I can hardly *wait* for this Friday.

For reviews of G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra and A Perfect Getaway, see "[Joe Blow\(s\)](#)."