

Written by Mike Schulz  
Sunday, 23 January 2011 14:35

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### ***NO STRINGS ATTACHED***

Against all expectations, at least *my* expectations, director Ivan Reitman’s *No Strings Attached* is a perfectly enjoyable piece of midwinter fluff, engaging and breezy and of no consequence whatsoever. Yet I’ll admit to being somewhat shocked when, two days after seeing it, I replayed the notes I quietly recorded during my screening, and discovered that I didn’t whisper even one criticism or complaint in the whole of its 105 minutes, which is a claim I can’t even make about *The Social Network*.

Then again, the movie is a formulaic romantic comedy starring Ashton Kutcher, so I suppose the complaints do take care of themselves.

With its script by Elizabeth Meriwether, *No String Attached* asks the age-old question: Can two young, single, great-looking individuals sustain a relationship based on nothing but boinking without accidentally falling in love? And being a Hollywood rom-com, the film’s answer, of course, has to be “no”; the sensitive, doting guy with the puppy-dog eyes will inevitably develop Deep Feelings, and will have his heart (momentarily) broken by his cooler, more emotionally wary gal pal. (If the gender roles were ever switched in this scenario, the movie would be considered almost unbearably cruel.) We know what we’re getting into here before the leading characters – Kutcher’s wannabe screenwriter Adam and Natalie Portman’s ER doctor Emma – even meet, and nothing that happens between the opening images and the rolling of the end credits will likely come as any sort of surprise.

*Unless*, that is, you enter Reitman’s offering the way I did, expecting precious little in the way of cleverness or laughs or freshly imagined characters – in which case *No Strings Attached* is a considerable surprise. To be sure, the film is occasionally, and annoyingly, coy and cutesy, as when Adam presents Emma and her roommates with a “period mix” CD to help them through their cycles. (Its song titles include “Red Red Wine,” “Sunday, Bloody Sunday,” and “I’ve Got the World on a String.”

*Aw-w-w-w*

... er, I mean,

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*ew-w-w-w*

!) But for every diversion that’s a bit too sitcom-ready for comfort, Reitman and Meriwether deliver lovely, flaky touches that easily make up for them; I particularly liked it when Adam, thanking Emma for their first sexual liaison, brought her a helium balloon reading

“Congratulations!” (And I

*really*

liked the subsequent reaction of Jake Johnson – as Adam’s chum Eli – who responded to Adam’s gesture with, “Who are you – the old guy from

*Up*

?”)

Time and again, Reitman graces his movie with gentler, more thoughtful rhythms than rom-coms of its ilk usually provide. He gives plenty of breathing room to Lake Bell, adorable and hilarious as a neurotic TV producer, and to Kevin Kline, enacting Adam’s randy, dope-smoking dad; the star of Reitman’s *Dave* is granted a sweetheart of a lengthy, uninterrupted scene in which he plays piano and serenades his son for his birthday. (The director also stages a trio of impressive shots when Emma goes miniature golfing and, without any assistance from the film’s editor, gets three holes-in-one.) And all throughout

*Attached*

*No Strings*

Reitman, aided by Meriwether’s oftentimes spiky dialogue, ensures that his supporting cast transcends their rather stock figures: Greta Gerwig and Mindy Kaling portray Emma’s funny doctor roomies and are both funny

*and*

believable doctors; Olivia Thirlby, too-infrequently-seen since playing best friend to Ellen Page’s Juno, is a robustly joyous presence; Chris “Ludacris” Bridges, as Adam’s bar-owner sounding board, deadpans his way through several outstanding bits. (His finest comes when he gets misty-eyed during a

*High School Musical*

-esque production number.)

The film’s unforced charm and friendliness are so pervasive, in truth, that even the typically self-regarding Kutcher can’t mar it, and actually comes through with a bunch of winning moments. He still appears too conspicuously “on,” the way he did in *That 70’s Show* – Kutcher always seems to be hearing a laugh track in his head – but the actor’s genial goofiness plays well off Portman’s sharp wit and superior dramatic chops; I’m not sure I ever truly bought them as a couple, but the performers are clearly having a good time together, and the good time is infectious. It’s basically just a well-made version of a movie you’ve already seen in numerous permutations – most recently as

*Love & Other Drugs* –

but happily,

*No Strings Attached*

is a modern romantic comedy I can recommend with very

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*few*  
strings attached.



### **THE WAY BACK**

If it weren't saddled with such a clunky, prosaic script, *The Way Back* might've really been something. Director Peter Weir's drama tells the “true” story of a group of World War II prisoners who escaped a Soviet gulag and attempted a 4,000-mile walk to freedom in India, and while the veracity of author Slavomir Rawicz's

*The Long Walk* –

the 1956 bestseller on which this film is based – has been widely discredited, the movie still boasts a formidable amount of gut-level power. There are few working directors so extraordinarily gifted at composition and the employment of sound (or lack thereof), and Weir, in his first movie since 2003's

*Master & Commander*,

continually reminds you that he's a master, as well – the haunting, resplendent images and evocative man-versus-nature sequences are stunning to behold. You don't need speech when Weir and cinematographer Russell Boyd deliver such sights as the jaw-dropping appearance of a life-sustaining lake, or the heartbreaking serenity on the face of a prisoner frozen in the snow, and the sound effects and Burkhard Dallwitz's subtly magisterial score offer aural wonders to match the visual ones;

*The Way Back*

delivers poetry without the verbiage.

But oh, the damned verbiage of this thing! When the dialogue in Weir's and Keith R. Clarke's script isn't underlining events that are already painfully obvious (“We can't see anything! The snow is blinding us!”), it's likely in service of blandly inspirational pronouncements, or halfhearted attempts at revealing character – the funny one of the group is actually *called* “the funny one” – or knee-jerk attempts to instill audience-friendly gags into a decidedly unamusing trek. (When the starving prisoners made a meal of a desert snake, I was

*praying*

that none of them would break the silence by cracking, “Tastes like chicken.” So much for prayers.) Yet even ignoring the dialogue, the script routinely fails. Several of the most seemingly

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important plot points, such as the climactic journey over the Himalayas, are oddly glossed over, and there’s a surfeit of meaningless religious symbolism that just gets in the way of the characters’ harrowing escapades; Saoirse Ronan’s Polish waif is even bedecked with a figurative crown of thorns, just like Robert Sean Leonard’s tortured thespian in Weir’s *Dead Poets Society*

. Considering all this, the actors, including Jim Struggess, Mark Strong, and Dragos Bucur, don’t stand much of a chance – giving a default-mode performance, the grimly intense Ed Harris is Ed Harris-ier than you’ve ever before seen him – and the only one who truly comes alive in *The Way Back*

is Colin Farrell, mostly because his entertaining, tough-guy mugging as a Russian criminal seems to belong to a different movie altogether. I kind of wish I could’ve seen

*that*

one.