RETURN TO ME

There's so much goodwill built into *Return to Me* – the promise of an audience-pleasing romantic comedy, the likability of the cast, the presence of director/co-writer/co-star Bonnie Hunt, the prospect of David Duchovny *smilin g –* that I feel like something of a heel for saying that the movie itself is pretty crummy.

But crummy it is, and not because of its lightness of tone or its implausible set-up. (Those very qualities can make escapist flicks quite entertaining.) What kills the project is its obviousness, both in its clumsy staging and in its insistence on creating characters so damned lovable that you rarely believe you're watching actual human beings; it's like a Muppet movie that forgot to include the Muppets.

On the other hand, I kinda liked the film's goofy set-up, if only because I'd never seen it before. Good-guy Bob (Duchovny) loses his beloved zookeeper wife (Joely Richardson) in a car accident, while at the same time, good-gal Grace (Minnie Driver) is on an operating table awaiting a long-overdue heart transplant. Guess whose heart she gets? And guess which characters end up falling in love without knowing what tragic event connects them? No guessing required, of course, and I found all of this perfectly reasonable in the realm of Hollywood's romantic-comedy standards – who cares *how* the leads fall in love as long as they do it with sex appeal and style? And on the surface, *Return to Me* has that in spades. Duchovny has terrific comic timing (those who know him only from Mulder missed his brilliant work on several episodes of HBO's *The Larry Sanders Show*) and an engaging earnestness, and Driver is an exquisite camera subject and has the most ebullient laugh of any modern-day actress I can name.

So what happened? Well, much as it pains me to lay too much blame at the feet of Bonnie Hunt

(who is never less than appealing as a performer and is often the best thing in her films), it seems her directorial choices sabotage the movie. There are scenes here that are such overt set-ups for future, sickly pay-offs that you're amazed that someone with Hunt's sharpness would include them at all – I'm thinking especially of the shots of Bob's dog staring at the front door, waiting for “Mom” to come home, and the scenes of Bob's wife communicating with her favorite, too-tightly-contained primate at the zoo. The use of audiences to wring tears out of audiences has been an entertainment staple for decades, but we view these scenes with their all-too-blatant staging and just *know* we're being primed for tears yet to come – you get angry at the film's manipulation even *before* the film actually begins manipulating you.

But Hunt's leanings toward the obvious apply to her humans, too. Grace is surrounded by a series of stereotypes; her grandfather (Carroll O'Connor) and great-uncle (Robert Loggia) run an Italian-Irish eatery, and the movie is filled with far too many scenes of these two cavorting with their assorted cronies over the poker table; their winsomeness is excruciating, and I'd die a happy man if I never have to witness another scene where “lovable” elders argue the merits of Frank Sinatra versus Dean Martin. Despite the natural charisma of the leads, both Bob and Grace are equally one-dimensional – Nice meets Nice – and other characters, like the leads' odious blind dates and Bob's level-headed best friend (the usually good David Alan Grier), are ciphers.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the only characters you want more of are the ones played by Hunt herself and James Belushi, as Grace's bickering married pals. Hunt, with her acerbic wit and dry-as-sandpaper delivery, is a specialist in movie-stealing, and Belushi has probably never before been this enjoyable; their scenes indicate a smarter, funnier movie than *Return to Me* tur ns out to be. As a director, Hunt seems to know this, and like the endless poker-table scenes, she lets their ramblings go on a little too long, too. But at least you're *grateful* for them. Your enjoyment of Hunt's and Belushi's acting is the one element in *Return to Me* that doesn't feel like it's being shoved down your throat; the movie could have been a zippy little entertainment if the rest of the project didn't feel so programmed.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Rules of Engagement is one of those thrillers that wants to command more attention and discussion than it warrants because its peripheral subject is a common one in dramas involving the military – what are the perils of commanding and following orders, and where does accountability lie? In the '90s alone, we've seem elements of this in everything from *A Few Good Men* to *Courage Under Fire* to *The General's Daughter*, and as in those films, the analysis of this subject in *Rules of Engagement* isn't very deep, either. But also like those other films, you can have a pretty good time at this one, too, because it showcases some fine actors emoting their hearts out, and the appeal of the courtroom drama accompanied by questionable flashbacks can't be denied. (Personally, though, I loathed *A Few Good Men*, but I'm in the minority on that one.) In the film, Samuel L. Jackson plays a Marine whose orders led to the killing of more than eighty protestors in Yemen, and whose court-martial trial finds Vietnam-vet pal Tommy Lee Jones acting as his defense attorney. Was Jackson's character a power-mad lunatic, or was he serving the country's best interests – or, more intriguingly, was it a bit of both?

Directed by thriller veteran William Friedkin, *Engagement* is swift and, well, engaging throughout, given marvelous intensity by the two leads; very few actors have ever done Jackson's unique brand of seething anger quite as well, and Jones offers his first truly sensational performance since *The Fugitive*. The whole film would qualify as a truly enjoyable time at the cineplex if it weren't for a few crushing stupidities: the ridiculous national-security adviser (the too-obviously cast Bruce Greenwood, that wormy hubby from *Double Jeopardy*), who stands as the film's token governmental boob, and the crawl right before the closing credits, where the fates of several characters are tidied up in a neat little package that goes against the grain of everything we'd seen previously. *Rules of Engagement* is the first movie I've ever seen that features what could have been its most melodramatically satisfying denouncements as afterthoughts; it has the ugly smell of studio tampering, with Paramount executives thinking that audiences would leave pissed without knowing what happened to certain characters after the film ends. Actually, it's intrusions like *this*

that really put us off.