

Got MILF?: "Playing for Keeps" and "Anna Karenina"

Written by Mike Schulz

Monday, 10 December 2012 10:27

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PLAYING FOR KEEPS

In director Gabriele Muccino's dramatic comedy *Playing for Keeps*, Gerard Butler portrays a former star athlete who hopes to reconnect with his ex-wife and son by coaching the kid's pee-wee soccer team, and who is consequently forced to (try to) resist the advances of a trio of beautiful, aggressive, lascivious soccer moms who can't keep their hands off him. This, in the language of Hollywood screenwriters, is what is known as "a problem."

This is also, for many of the rest of us, what is known as "puerile misogynist crap," and it seems to me the only way *Playing for Keeps* could have possibly worked was if its leading actor was so charming, and its female support so funny, that we didn't notice or care how cloying and borderline-offensive the narrative itself actually was. Unfortunately, though, charm is wholly absent – did I mention that our lead is Gerard Butler? – and the closest the film comes to a laugh is an early scene in which the coach takes a leisurely drive with his son, and handles the steering wheel with a vigor that suggests a high-speed spin on a particularly curvy racetrack. (Needless to say, the near-laugh is an unintentional one.) For keeps? Muccino's movie isn't even worth a rental.

For once, however, Butler is not the chief irritant in his latest big-screen showcase, mostly because the man is allowed to speak with his natural Scottish brogue, and not forced into that painful wrestling match with vowel sounds that constitutes one of his typical American accents.

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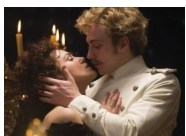
(He also shares several scenes with Dennis Quaid, as if to remind us that there actually is another name actor in Tinseltown more forced, unpleasant, and off-the-charts smarmy than Gerard Butler.) But while the performer is less off-putting than usual, Butler's George Dryer is still a hopelessly ill-defined and uninteresting creation – not that Robbie Fox's screenplay gives the actor much chance to be anything else. How did George wind up squandering all the goodwill and cash he amassed as a professional soccer player? What caused the eventual split between him and his ex-wife (Jessica Biel)? Beyond some vaguely displayed guilt, what does George feel about his liaisons, and near-liaisons, with the maternal hotties played by Catherine Zeta-Jones, Judy Greer, and Uma Thurman? (Whenever he's ensnared into a surprise tryst, Muccino's camera forgets to show us George's reaction to the seduction.) These and other questions are left naggingly unanswered in Fox's script, and Butler's one-note renderings of George's entitlement and defeatism and family-man longing don't fill in any holes for us; the movie lopes along to its inevitable, undeserved happy ending with dreary predictability and not an iota of passion or personality.

At least no *fresh* personality, as the gifted comediennes cast as George's admirers have nothing to do but tread familiar ground: Zeta-Jones, with her devilish grin, makes overt, come-hither gestures, Greer reprises her manic-sobbing shtick from *The Descendants*

, Thurman plays it sultry and mildly crazy, and you really don't buy the moms' untethered lust for George for an instant. (At one point, the coach jokingly tells his landlord that the key to his romantic successes is his accent, and that seems as good a rationale as any.) Sporting dowdy mom-wear, and made to spend an inordinate amount of time looking miserable, Biel gives the nearest thing to an honest performance here, but your moderate affection for her would mean more if you didn't think her character was better off with the forgettable dullard she's newly engaged to (James Tupper) than she'd ever be with George. In the end, that's the most dispiriting thing about

Playing for Keeps

; it actually makes blandness look like a step in the right direction.



ANNA KARENINA

In one of those occasional perversities of scheduling, *Playing for Keeps* was the only area

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release to open over the past weekend, so it seemed a fine time for an out-of-town trek to catch *Anna Karenina*

, playwright Tom Stoppard's adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's classic literary downer. (The film is currently playing at the Marcus Sycamore Cinema in Iowa City's Sycamore Mall.) And I'm happy to say that director Joe Wright's offering was totally worth the drive, even though I didn't enjoy myself all that much.

With frequent Wright muse Keira Knightley in the title role, and Aaron Taylor-Johnson as Anna's lover Count Vronsky, this latest version of the oft-filmed Tolstoy novel is a dud as an emotional experience; Knightley, acting from the neck up, merely vacillates between interpretations of romantic ardor and shamed melancholy, and Taylor-Johnson comes off solely as a handsomely outfitted stiff. Taken together, they give you so little opportunity to connect with this *Anna Karenina* th

at you might find yourself eager for Anna's fateful rendezvous with that locomotive, but thankfully, the movie gives you plenty of other reasons to stick with it. Wright performs several miracles of choreography within his elaborate set, which, in a rather brilliant act of commentary, finds events in Moscow and St. Petersburg taking place on – and behind, and above – a literal theatre stage, underlining how Anna and her equally privileged compatriots are forever trapped in the public eye. (The means by which Wright transforms a manor's interior into a densely populated street scene make you want to applaud.) And with Jude Law, Matthew Macfadyen, Kelly Macdonald, Alicia Vikander, Domhnall Gleeson, and others delivering smart, focused character turns, the movie's supporting cast proves as expressive and textured as the expectedly stellar production and costume design, with the jewelry alone worthy of an extended curtain call. Given

Anna Karenina

's underwhelming leads, I left the picture disappointed. Yet there's so much excellence surrounding them that it was hardly a crushing disappointment, and while I may not have cared much for Wright's movie, I doubt that'll stop me, one day, from making a return trip to this particular Russian landscape.

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