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### **DR. T AND THE WOMEN**

*Dr. T and the Women* shows director Robert Altman in a sunny, happy frame of mind – for almost an hour and a half. Trouble is, the film runs a little over two hours. As the movie nears its conclusion, it starts to go sour, and you get a gnawing feeling that Altman and his screenwriter (Anne Rapp) aren't going to know how to end their work.

You're proven correct. This is almost the exact same thing that happened on the last Altman/Rapp collaboration, *Cookie's Fortune*, which started out as an amusingly glib Southern Gothic and, in its final 45 minutes, eventually turned on its characters and their situations, discarding the film's cleverness for something bordering on the ludicrous. There are many reasons to see *Dr. T* – a playfully relaxed Richard Gere, the costuming, the astonishing female performers – but it doesn't sit well after the credits roll; something unpleasant and disquieting lingers, and it's the feeling that Altman and Rapp secretly despise the characters you've guiltlessly enjoyed throughout the film.

*Dr. T* is the nickname of Dr. Sully Travis (Gere), the most sensitive and popular gynecologist in the city of Dallas – and, apparently, on the planet. His waiting room is filled to bursting with Dallas' women of privilege, clawing at each other for the chance to have the legendary Dr. T examine them next. Despite leading what should be a charmed life, the film finds Dr. T at a perfect midlife-crisis point – his wife (Farrah Fawcett) is being sent to a mental hospital; his

## Entertainment Nothing to Sneer At: "Dr. T and the Women" and "The Contender"

Written by Mike Schulz

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oldest daughter (Kate Hudson) is getting married to a man who is not, to put it mildly, the love of her life; his younger daughter (Tara Reid) is a Kennedy buff who sees conspiracy in everything; his alcoholic sister-in-law (Laura Dern) has just moved into his house with her three kids; and he's developing a major crush on a sexy new golf pro (Helen Hunt), despite being a faithful husband of 20 years. What's a charming, rich, handsome OB-GYN to do?

For quite a stretch, this scenario is marvelously entertaining. Altman displays his customary facility with the camera, effortlessly gliding through the lives of all of these characters with masterly ease and precision. He and Rapp have come up with a great joke at the film's center – that, for Dallas's cultured women, a trip to the gynecologist's office is an exhilarating and erotic journey – and a lot of terrific ones on the sidelines, like the hunting trips Dr. T takes with his buddies (Robert Hays, Andy Richter, and Matt Malloy), on which they certainly dress the parts but never actually kill a thing. And the film's costumes, designed by Dona Granata, are almost worth the price of admission – a sea of primary colors and pastels, usually with feathers and fur to match, that make the Texas elite seem like creatures from another planet.

The cast, too, is sensational: Gere, using his laconic humor to properly bemused effect; Fawcett, poignant and understated; Hunt, down-to-earth and graceful; Dern, a high-comic hoot; Reid, grave and focused; Hudson, effervescent and beguiling. Shelley Long might be trying a bit too hard as Gere's assistant (though she scores several laughs), and Liv Tyler, as Hudson's maid-of-honor, does her typical deer-in-headlights thing, but overall this is the best ensemble the movies have given us in quite a while, and we enjoy spending time in their company.

Didn't Altman and Rapp? As Dr. T reaches the wedding scene, and we await the inevitable Gere breakdown, it's the movie that has the breakdown. For the length of the film, we've been enjoying the antics of this group of female eccentrics and their effect on Dr. T, but in a bizarre little turnaround, Altman and Rapp seem to indict us for it, presenting the women as, in truth, rather selfish, and borderline insane (or in the case of Fawcett, not borderline at all). This happens even with the film's most grounded characters – Hunt's sensible golfer and Reid's "good" daughter – who turn out to be hateful in their own ways; in the end, everyone but Dr. T turns into crap. Altman's and Rapp's distaste for their creations is also reflected in the way some of them are shuffled offscreen with no care whatsoever (Dern suffers the worst) and the out-of-the-blue, apocalyptic denouement, which is all the more offensive for what it says about Dr. T and the women in his life. (This aftermath might confuse and anger many viewers – it's as if the filmmakers threw up their hands and said, "We give up. *You* end the damn thing.")

Even with Altman and Rapp's unwarranted moralizing, the film might have worked if it simply wrapped itself up in a satisfying way. Entertainment-wise, is there anything more infuriating than

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a movie that doesn't know how to end? A crummy conclusion can almost completely ruin your enjoyment of everything that came before, and in the case of *Dr. T and the Women*, that's a whole lot of enjoyment ruined.



### **THE CONTENDER**

*The Contender*, writer-director Rod Lurie's political thriller, is punchy and sharp and entertaining, and like most political thrillers, not believable for a second. That should not, however, detract from your enjoyment of the film; it might even enhance it. After the vice president dies, President Evans (Jeff Bridges) appoints female Senator Laine Hanson (Joan Allen) to fill the vacancy, much to the chagrin of his Republican rivals, led by swarthy politician Shelly Runyon (Gary Oldman). Runyon looks for dirt on Hanson and finds it – rumors of collegiate debauchery and incriminating photos that might or might not feature the senator in a series of compromising positions. Leading her confirmation hearings, Runyon asks for Hanson's assessment of the scandal, and, like many colleagues and the president himself, is shocked when she refuses to discuss it at all, saying that any comment is an invasion of privacy and beneath her.

This faultless-symbol-of-professional-martyrdom role is unimaginable without the peerless Joan Allen in it, adding worlds of complexity to her rather stoic character, and she's nearly matched by Bridges, sly and vaguely shifty, and Oldman, uncharacteristically restrained. There's not much to discuss about the movie – its plot surprises are rather tame and its descent into rah-rah *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*-style verbiage is unconvincing – but it has been put together skillfully, it features a fine cast (even normally one-note performers like Christian Slater, Sam Elliott, and Mariel Hemingway show some spunk), and it's the rare recent release that gets more and more gripping as it progresses.

*The Contender* is nothing more than an enjoyable time-waster, but compared to the glaring miscalculations of something like

*Dr. T and the Women*

, that enjoyment is nothing to sneer at.