

## Ideas Salvage "Simone": Also, "Serving Sara"

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 27 August 2002 18:00

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**SIMONE**

Andrew Niccol appears to be obsessed with a theme that, in all likelihood, he can spend his entire filmmaking career exploring: What is the nature of reality? In 1997's vastly underrated *Gattaca*

, which Niccol wrote and directed, he investigated the perils of genetic engineering, as his biologically "natural" protagonist Vincent assumed the identity of the genetically "perfect" Jerome to further his space-exploration career; the film, which on paper might seem a cerebral sci-fi comedy of mistaken identity, dramatized what it meant to be "real" in an unreal world, and was a heady, thrilling experience.

And, of course, 1998's *The Truman Show*, which Niccol also wrote and which I consider one of the five best films of the past five years, had our Everyman hero wondering if he was losing his mind because he began to believe that *nothing* in his life was real. (As it turns out, he was right.) With these cinematic works on his résumé, I suppose it was just a matter of time before Niccol tackled the subject of virtual reality and our relation to it, which leads us to the new comedy

*Simone*

, writer-director Niccol's take on the creation of computer-generated performers. As a comedy – hell, as a film in general – it's fairly clunky, yet it has a surfeit of great ideas, most of which are

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*almost*

realized, and it's one of two or maybe three movies this summer that I was still thinking about days after seeing it. The movie is just this side of passable, but at least it's

*about*

something.

Al Pacino plays the pretentious art-film director Viktor Taransky, whose works have ghastly titles like *Sunrise Sunset* and *Eternity Forever*. His questionable talents, though, have no place in Hollywood's blockbuster-minded world, and when he loses the star of his latest picture (Winona Ryder, doing her finest, funniest work in over a decade) over "creative differences," he's informed by his producer/ex-wife (Catherine Keener) that his contract is being terminated and his film shelved. Enter the dying computer wonk Hank (Elias Koteas), who introduces Viktor to his grand creation, a computer-generated actress who appears utterly real (and, in real life, is – she's played by Rachel Roberts); within months, this "synthespian," whom Viktor dubs Simone (short for "Simulation One"), is not only starring in Viktor's film but creating an international sensation for her brilliant acting and beautiful looks. The comedy comes from Viktor's attempts to keep Simone's true, pixelized identity a secret while furthering his career, and how the plan eventually backfires when the "legend" of Simone proves greater than Viktor can control.

There's little doubt that *Simone* could work only as a comedy, as the degree of suspension-of-disbelief required reaches outrageous proportions. Simone's co-stars never question why they can't film their scenes in her presence, Simone becomes a world-renowned pop star, it appears, due to her uninspired warbling of Aretha Franklin's "Natural Woman," and based on the clips we see, Simone is actually a *terrible* actress and Viktor's films borderline unwatchable. (Viktor is like Ingmar Bergman without the vision.) Yet the more over-the-top the film became the more I laughed; by the time Simone receives not one but *two* Best Actress nominations simultaneously and, in an astonishing tie, manages to win Oscars for *both*

of them, the sheer overkill of Simone's rise to superstardom becomes quite funny. Niccol is obviously goosing the notion of celebrity hero-worship, and by doing so, he lands on a great theme: The less we know about a celebrity, the more we

*want*

to know, and the less they give, the more we project. In general, though,

*Simone*

would have succeeded far better had it been directed with a straighter face. Marvelous talent though he is, Niccol just doesn't have the knack for cartoonishness or knockabout farce. The scenes of Viktor trying to pass Simone off as real – sneaking her out of hotel rooms, evading the media, airing nationally televised interviews – are flat and unfocused when they should be airy, and the movie has surprisingly little momentum. Its ideas are great, but

*Simone*

's individual scenes limp along with seemingly little purpose; the film is probably more fun to

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think about later than actually view.

It *is* fun to think about later, though, and technically, the movie has a lot to offer, including Edward Lachman's photography and music by the sublime Carter Burwell. It also has Pacino, whose second-mezzanine emoting is always more fun in comedy than in drama, and a supporting cast that features the reliable Jay Mohr, Pruitt Taylor Vance, and the young, beguiling Evan Rachel Wood. (Only Keener is a disappointment: She's played variants on this brittle corporate exec so many times her character name might as well be "Catherine Keener.")

*Simone*

isn't nearly in the class of Niccol's

*Gattaca*

or

*The Truman Show*

accomplishments, and it's quite possible that I'm overrating it based on how insipid the new releases of the past few weeks have been. Yet ambling though it is, the film manages to be strangely fascinating; it's virtually entertaining.



**SERVING SARA**

Matthew Perry and Elizabeth Hurley deserve better than *Serving Sara*, but then again, we all do. This laborious farce features the duo trying to smack down Hurley's estranged, cheating husband (Bruce Campbell) in a multi-million dollar divorce settlement, and it has the scuzzy, dim look of a movie that spent way too many months in the Paramount vaults while the powers-that-be determined the appropriate time to unleash it; you can practically see the cobwebs and smell the mothballs. (This might not entirely be the studio's fault; director Reginald Hudlin hasn't made a good-looking movie since the first

*House Party*

in 1990.) Perry and Hurley have previously proven their comic adroitness (he on

*Friends*

, of course, but also in the surprisingly terrific

*The Whole Nine Yards*

, and she in

*Bedazzled*

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and the original

*Austin Powers*

) but their material here is distressingly unfunny – “Look! Perry’s giving a prostate exam to a bull!” – and as a comedy pairing, they appear to have barely been introduced; the couple’s badinage is so forced you’d swear that,

*à la Simone*

, one or the other was computer-generated. At best, the film will serve as a throwaway tidbit for the sequel to Bruce Campbell’s memoir

*If Chins Could Kill*

; as is often the case, Campbell seems to be enjoying himself despite – or perhaps because of – how little he has to work with. Well, at least

*someone’s*

having fun.