



## **ALONG CAME POLLY**

There's a pretty funny movie lurking within *Along Came Polly*, but unfortunately, it bears little relation to the slack and obvious one Ben Stiller and Jennifer Aniston are stuck in.

If there's any film genre more difficult to write in than the romantic comedy, I can't imagine what it would be; how many different ways can screenwriters be expected to keep A away from B through the course of 90 minutes without reminding audiences that they've already seen it all before? Writer-director John Hamburg doesn't solve the problem in *Along Came Polly*. Instead, he involves his protagonists in about a half-dozen "madcap" situations that were already overused years ago on

*Friends*

– which makes Ms. Aniston's appearance here quite distracting – in the hopes that at least one of them will provide sufficient laughs. None of them does, and Stiller and Aniston – who, oddly enough, played opposite one another in an early

*Friends*

episode – don't share any comic or romantic chemistry; he's playing yet another variant on his put-upon schlemiel from

*There's Something About Mary*

, she's miscast as a slovenly free spirit, and you can't imagine what eventually bonds them –

*Polly*

feels more like an

*idea*

for a romantic-comedy than the actual thing.

Yet you can't quite give up on the movie, because – lo and behold! – there's Philip Seymour Hoffman in second-banana mode, giving his scenes enough comic zest to keep your attention from completely waning. (Hoffman's supporting role is so ingenious that you wish he were given a whole movie to play around in it.) As a former child star so desperate for a comeback that he hires a crew to follow him around and film his own *E! True Hollywood* story, Hoffman, garrulous and frighteningly self-involved, is an uninhibited slapstick spectacle – Jack Black as method actor – and he shakes the movie out of the romantic-comedy doldrums. (Alec Baldwin and Hank Azaria – two more *Friends* veterans! – also help matters somewhat, but they're not around for long.) Hoffman's not quite reason enough to sit through the tired and unfunny formula of

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### *Along Came Polly*

, but he's the closest the movie comes to a display of comic invention.



### **WIN A DATE WITH TAD HAMILTON!**

As romantic comedies go, *Along Came Polly* doesn't hold a candle to *Win a Date with Tad Hamilton!*, but that has nothing to do with either film's plotting; it's just that watching Kate Bosworth being romanced by Josh Duhamel is a far more appealing proposition than watching Ben Stiller attempt to hide his gastrointestinal discomfort from Jennifer Aniston. Make no mistake:

*Win a Date*  
still isn't very  
*good*

. It's typical Hollywood condescension about how small-town values inevitably trounce the venal machinations of the L.A. crowd – it's Hollywood's way of telling audiences "You might be poor, but you're happy!" while getting rich off of movies that tell audiences they're poor but happy – and you can correctly guess every plot point in the film within its first 10 minutes. Yet romantic comedies, in general, have a trump card that no other genre possesses: If your leads are charming enough, you can sail past every flaw in the movie and still have a reasonably good time.

*Polly*

doesn't work because you never care for Stiller and Aniston either individually or as a couple;

*Win a Date*

works much better because, whatever the film's faults, Kate Bosworth and Josh Duhamel provide charm to spare. Bosworth, from

*Blue Crush*

, doesn't possess any kind of distinct screen personality yet, but her blushing-virgin act is utterly winning, and although Duhamel resembles, in both looks and performance, a bunch of other actors – Timothy Olyphant especially, but also Robert Downey Jr., Mark Ruffalo, and Charlie Sheen – he has a sweet, nearly apologetic romantic charisma all his own. Duhamel's Tad Hamilton seems both jazzed and humbled by his character's success, and he gazes at Bosworth's simplistic rural life with bemused incredulity and quiet wonder; it's a surprisingly sharp comic turn in a film nearly devoid of sharp edges. Once we're clued in to the fact that Bosworth's childhood friend, played by Topher Grace, has been secretly in love with her for years, you can easily guess where the movie's going, but

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*Win a Date with Tad Hamilton!*

is the rare romantic comedy where you'd rather the leading actress wound up with the *wrong* guy.



**DISNEY'S TEACHER'S PET**

The role of Tad Hamilton's hustling agent is played by Nathan Lane, and after seeing his performance there and sitting through his voice-over work in *Disney's Teacher's Pet*, I don't have any desire to see or hear him ever again. Though he's a legendary stage performer and has certainly done some fine screen work – both in the flesh and performing voices for *The Lion King* and the

*Stuart Little*

pictures – he's, lately, become a caricature of himself, ranting and kvetching with that familiar whine that makes you want to hide under your theatre seat, and I was tired of his

*Teacher's Pet*

antics before he had finished his opening number. Yet the whole movie, based on the adventures of what I'm told is a popular Saturday-morning TV character, is an aural nightmare; it's as if the filmmakers went out of their way to hire the most vocally shrill actors on the planet. In addition to Lane, we get Debra Jo Rupp, Kelsey Grammer, Paul Reubens, Wallace Shawn, Megan Mullally, and – in casting too inevitable to be believed – George Costanza's parents Jerry Stiller and Estelle Harris, any and all of whom are enough to make you wish you had worn your earmuffs

*inside*

the auditorium. Though

*Teacher's Pet*

showcases Gary Baseman's distinctive, deceptively crude-looking animation and features some moderately clever songs, it's hellish to listen to; ideally, it should be viewed on DVD with the subtitles on and the sound off.

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## **CALENDAR GIRLS**

It took me forever to get around to *Calendar Girls*, mainly because I had convinced myself I'd already seen it. The film, based on the real exploits of a group of middle-aged British women who bared all for a fundraising calendar, is one of those sweetly innocuous comedy-dramas that entertain you for a couple of hours and exit your brain in even less time, and, in our motif for the week, there isn't a surprise to be had. But I'm glad I finally saw the film, because it's pretty terrific. Those accomplished, bone-dry comediennes Helen Mirren and Julie Walters give their roles poignancy and wit, and although the movie is a

*Full Monty*

clone right down to its needless subplots, it, too, is beautifully paced and effortlessly touching. (And lord knows there are worse movies to steal from.)

*Calendar Girls*

is the kind of lightweight diversion that, at the moment, British filmmakers make better than anyone else; did all of Hollywood's competent craftsmen cross the Atlantic without telling us?