

LOVE SERENADE [1997]

by

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In Sunray, a fictional flyspeck town in the Australian outback, live Vicki-Ann, 26, (Rebecca Frith), who works in a unisex beauty salon, and her sister Dimity, 20, (Miranda Otto) who works at the town's only Chinese restaurant. Because he has received too much notoriety (i.e., constant philandering), Brisbane radio DJ, fortysomething and thrice-divorced, Ken Sherry (George Shevtov) arrives in exile as their new neighbor. With few prospects in town, Vicki-Ann immediately fantasizes about marrying him. However, Dimity is the first to hop into his bed. This causes some strife between the sisters. Vicki Ann becomes a little aggressive and very successful, since Sherry dumps Dimity and beds Vicki-Ann. However, when he refuses to marry her, she becomes depressed. Both sisters combine their forces to kill him. (Rated R).

I am probably misreading this film as a negative tract on the miserable lives, hopeless aspirations, and very small satisfactions of three damaged and isolated souls. It must be *my* error because the film was the winner of the Camera d'Or at the 1996 Cannes Film Festival (thought this film does have the kind of nasty, biting wit that film festival juries seem to dote on). In addition, almost every reviewer saw it as a nice little comedy from down under; given their quirky ways down there, one must expect a little oddness, and, anyway, this is the first film from writer/director Shirley Barrett.

However, I find this no excuse for the film's multitude of intellectual gaucheries: going to great lengths to produce filmic gargoyles and then asking us to like them; to playing *entire* '70s songs to acting styles that change, seemingly randomly, from scene to scene; to superfluous and annoying camerawork (the crane must have been a cheap rental that week and so if you have it, you gotta use it . . . and use it . . . and use it); to a bit of surrealism thrown in for no conceivable reason (except possibly to convince the audience that the filmmakers know what it was); symbolism so heavy-handed as to destroy meaning.

The film begins underwater, symbolic of the feminine and the unconscious. Fish swim around a lure, most ignore it, one bites. And now the rest of the film. Symbolism should enhance, elaborate, expand. Here it simply and leadenly repeats what we are about to see. Two sisters, whose favorite hobby is fishing (give me a break) are desperately trying to hook a man.

About the only bit of symbolism that works for me is Ken's response to seeing the ramshackle, 50-watt radio station gulag he has been sentenced to: "The music is still on vinyl." He has entered the primitive, no CDs, no modern technology – no modern

excuses for feelings, only the real, primitive thing. Of course, he doesn't see this and activates primitive forces that eventually do him in.

He's a disk jockey – more symbolism. He is a disembodied, ubiquitous, and impersonal voice. And, of course, Ken Sherry turns out to be out of touch with his body (his sex is mechanical and apparently without physical pleasure), a compulsive bachelor deathly afraid of emotional commitment. Ken's seductions are about as crude and unromantic as could be imagined, "Take off your clothes."

Even the characters' names cause groans. Ken Sherry – as in Ken and Barbie, the ideal man. And Sherry – as in a sweet wine that will intoxicate the drinker. And this is exactly how the two sisters react to him. (There are apparently no other women in town.) Vicki-Ann is named after two English Queens not known for their success in love. Dimity sounds like "dimwitted" which is exactly as the film portrays her. The town where all this takes place is Sun Ray, as if to indicate that all this will add up to some sun shining on these two women's miserable lives, or a ray of hope. If murder is the solution to male chauvinism, then all is well in the world.

Much like *The Piano* [1993] (whose director produced this film), *Love Serenade* presents the audience with damaged women as if they were the norm (I hope this isn't the case in real life). Vicki-Ann is a hairdresser, and thus concerned with the external appearances of people and, psychologically, with persona. She lies compulsively to her sister (and to herself) about her relationship with Ken – there is none. She keeps imposing new fantasy roles on him: he's too good to talk to her, he's heartbroken, and so on. Saying things like, "slowly, bit by bit, he may learn to love again," we know she got this stuff straight out of the tabloids, women's magazines, and romance novels. This is the way she wants her life to be. Yet, when he rejects all her advances, she blindly interprets these setbacks as victories, i.e., "He loved my chicken casserole," says Vicki-Ann when she knows full well that he ate out at a restaurant. While Ken can only see women as objects to seduce and abandon, Vicki-Ann can only see men as potential husbands. Ken and Vicki-Ann suffer, in my eyes, from the same disease and much to the same degree: the objectification of the other. The difference between them is the Ken is punished and Vicki-Ann isn't.

Dimity is the shy, knock-kneed, and insecure sibling, awkward at work, dressed up in her cheap skirt and nylons, walking like she's about to fall over, and sticking her hand out at an angle like she's imitating a charm school magazine. She works in a restaurant and is thus concerned with nourishment. However, in real life she can give it neither to herself nor to others. Her clumsy "seduction" of Ken succeeds only because Ken is afraid of experienced women who might recognize him for what he is. He announces that he "specializes in virgins." Later, when she discovers her sister in bed with Ken, sibling loyalty suddenly swapped for bitter sibling rivalry, she (perhaps) fantasizes that the large stuffed marlin on the wall is beginning to move and pant just like Ken having sex. (This is the umpteenth time the comparison has been made, but the filmmakers still think we haven't gotten it.) Dimity is just as out of touch with reality as her sister, only in a different direction.

However, the most degrading element is that they would *want* a slug with legs like Ken Sherry (a long, thin, tan cross between Barry Manilow and Howard Stern). The two sisters are enthralled by his urbane, cultured manner, and clearly fail to recognize, which we do instantly, what a greasy slimeball he is. Ken has all the mannerisms and appetites of a snake – cold, calculating, and cruel. His dead eyes reflect an equally lifeless soul. His mechanical sex doesn't give him physical or emotional pleasure but is a means of gaining power over women.

Since the film insists on its pseudo-intellectual references, we have to consider these too. Ken seems to be part fish since he has gill slits that leak when he gargles. This corresponds to the opening underwater scene of fishing (for a man). After the sisters have killed him, they try to dump him in the river, but he seems to regain life and swim off. He came from the water; he returns to the water. He came from their unconscious as the fulfillment of their “dreams.” What they discovered is the worst type of man, not only in external life, but also within themselves.

It is a psychological given that if one is willing to face the contents of the unconscious and deal with them, healing will take place. Not so here. And this is the real rip-off of *Love Serenade*, the sisters seem to gain nothing from their experiences.

Is the film suggesting that effort is useless, nothing can be accomplished anyway? Australians love to create films (such as *Sweetie* [1989], *Muriel's Wedding* [1994], or *Strictly Ballroom* [1992]) populated by people whose lives seem made out of pop fantasies and sheer desperation, but we deserve better. I have nothing against feminist films (indeed, we need many more of them) or films made from a woman's point of view (we need more of them, too), however, a film with this much pseudo-intellectual clap-trap baggage will slow down the Movement rather than help it. Giving us cardboard figures with no background, no future, no exposition of relationship, essentially no personality, is not a positive step. Producing weak, unlikable female characters who suffer to no end, learn nothing, and endanger their immortal souls for naught, is not my version of cinematic progress.

Love Serenade. Directed by Shirley Barrett. Produced by Jan Campion. Screenplay by Shirley Barrett. Cinematography by Mandy Walker. Distributed by Miramax Films, 1997.