

PLAYING BY HEART

[1998]

by

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Playing by Heart. Written and directed by Willard Carroll. Edited by Pietro Scalia. Music by John Barry. Cinematography by Volmos Zsigmond. 1998

We follow a series of seemingly unrelated couples dealing in various ways with personal pain. A mother (Ellen Burstyn) nurses her son (Jay Mohr) who is dying of AIDS. Alienated, club-crawling Joan (Angelina Jolie) uses defensive wisecracks to penetrate the shy and recalcitrant Keenan's (Ryan Phillippe) armor. About to celebrate their 40th wedding anniversary, Paul (Sean Connery) and Hannah (Gena Rowlands) work under a double cloud, Paul's brain tumor and the revelation of an affair he had a decade ago. There is also theater director Meredith (Gillian Anderson) who is gun-shy about relationships and slowly melts to the charms of architect Trent (Jon Stewart). Gracie (Madeleine Stowe) is married to Hugh (Dennis Quaid) who she thinks is totally unimaginative but who in reality does theater class exercise in public and is having a purely physical affair with Roger (Anthony Edwards). Over the course of a week, each couple begins to resolve their difficulties and they all come together at the Paul and Hannah's wedding anniversary. (Rated R)

There are two ways to interpret this film's title. Often "playing by heart" means doing things by rote. And this is how most of the characters in the film begin, living a life of thoughtless repetition, complacent in repeating and reinforcing experiences of the past.

However, there is another reading of the words of the title. "Playing by heart" can also mean following the dictates of one's heart. And this is how most of the characters end the film. The journey for each of them is different, unique, and refreshingly free of clichés.

In addition to the multiple reading of the title, the film is full of other doublings. The story, for instance, when compared to the traditional Hollywood way of unreeling a tale, is told in two different directions at once. We meet seemingly desperate characters and follow their exploits. At the end of the film, we learn there are strong, intimate relationships between every one of them. In most film that deal with the family, the film begins with an inventory of the characters (as in *Godfather*) and then goes on with their exploits often inviting us to compare and contrast them.

While the density of the intellectual, verbal and visual texts make it unnecessary, the film is laced with occasional symbolism. Some of it is silly fun like talk of sex over a large bowl filled with oranges and bananas. Some of it is charming as when Julie comes to terms with her own emotions and literally wears a heart on her sleeve (another reference to the title).

Much of the text is the fodder of soap operas. The difference being that here the problems read as real and everyday rather than clichés (a recognition shared by the smart script and the deftness of the actors). People and their feelings are treated with respect. And, most important, the solutions to the problems are realistic, believable, and offer something of wisdom. This makes the sloppy sentimentalism forgivable, even acceptable. We even believe the “love conquers all” message as a cure to alcoholism (thankfully, Hugh’s brain tumor doesn’t go into spontaneous remission).

The dialogue is often entertaining and delightful, as when a drag queen says he’s 29, “and those are real years, not Heather Locklear years.” Sometimes lines we’ve all heard before, like “What did I do to deserve this?” are given a new context – said in appreciation of another rather than the last words out the door – that brings unexpected depth to the characters and the film.

At bottom the film takes on the thorny problem of love in the modern world of HIV – how successful the film is depends on what you bring to it in terms of your own feelings about the complexities of love. While it doesn’t idealize the older, more traditional takes on affairs of the heart, it has little to offer of the new state of affairs beyond recommending agapic love. Joan and Keenan seem to be content with a relationship without intimate physical contact, something I am sure the older generation could not comprehend.

In many ways *Playing by Heart* is an actor’s showcase. Sean Connery and Gena Rowlands bring a believable passion and concern to their characters where other actors may not have been quite so convincing when the characters are at such desperate ends. And there is a priceless bit where Connery imitates a puppy dog. Connery, too, makes the convoluted explanation of a mid-life crisis/affair 25 years previous acceptable, even believable, rather than just some fancy verbal footwork to cover up an inexcusable indiscretion.

One of the delights of *Playing by Heart* is the ordinariness of these various people’s problems. Nothing is blown up into heroic proportions, yet the people are effected and affected by their various situations. We can thereby identify more easily with them. Far more easily than in, say, Robert Altman’s *Short Cuts* [1993] – a similarly constructed film – which may fascinate us with its fringe personalities (a phone-sex operator feeds her baby while purveying her trade), but doesn’t welcome us into its midst as does *Playing by Heart*.

Playing by Heart is a rare film for the late '90s – it has a happy ending that, which terribly sentimental, is acceptable to contemporary sensibilities. It is about people of all ages and all circumstances trying to understand each other and, in turn, be understood.

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