

THE BIRD CAGE [1996]

by

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Val Goldman (Dan Futterman) wants to marry. There is only one problem: his fiancée's parents want to meet his. Val's "parents" are Armand Goldman (Robin Williams), the gay owner of a drag club and his significant other, Albert (Nathan Lane), while Barbara's parents are the ultra-conservative Senator Keeley (Gene Hackman) and his seemingly born-to-be-naive wife (Diane Wiest). Armand and Albert decide to fake straightness and quickly redecorate (actually un-decorate) their Miami Beach pad. They even recruit Val's biological mother, Katie Archer (Christine Baranski) to help in the deception. The ruse is spoiled by Armand's ultra-faggy housekeeper's (Hank Azaria) inept attempts to act straight and Albert's drama-queen hysterics. The Senator, the co-founder of an ultra conservative moral organization, is hounded by the press because the organization's leader dies in bed with a black, underage prostitute. What follows is a labyrinth of slipping identities, camp, cross-dressing, cross-cross-dressing, and emotional outpourings. However, when everyone learns to extend themselves beyond their prejudices about the "other," they get together and save the day. The Senator escapes politically unscathed; Val and Barbara are married. (Rated R)

The Bird Cage is quite conscious of its exploration of the "edges" of society. It begins with a long shot with the camera skimming the ocean, flying rapidly toward the shore. It is this edge between ocean and land, symbolically between the unconscious and the conscious, between what is hidden in society and what is available for public inspection, that the film dives into. But *The Bird Cage* is remarkable for far more than a public exploration of a gay subculture. *The Bird Cage* recommends that the gay subculture is actually the residence of true American values!

Whenever a culture looks to a minority in its search for values, it says much more about the majority's values than those of the minority. It makes little difference if the minority is black, Hispanic, Oriental, southerner or Yankee, Jew or Amish. They are almost always the subject of, rather than wishful thinking, wishful projection. Basically, the dominant culture looks to the minority as a source of something they think they have lost (or perhaps didn't have in the first place). What is perceived as undeveloped or lost is then projected on the "other." In the past, Black cultures were looked to as the sources of music and dance. Oriental ideologies were sought as sources of philosophical wisdom. Today, there seems to be a trend to look to the homosexual subculture – and within that the drag sub-subculture – as a source of family values! The recent spate of movies which seem to think that homosexuals are cute in fancy clothes and who spout family values says reams more about the needs of the audience than about the supposed subject matter of these films.

(Looking to the drag subculture for a reinforcement of majority values is comparatively safe. After all, men in drag look like men in drag, while – far more dangerous – other gays and lesbians look just like everyone else. Taking its cue from this less distinguishable group is dangerous because the majority culture might find it difficult to retain its sense of self – read “superiority.”)

In fact, these movies simply take old themes, archetypal motifs, and wrap them in new clothing (pardon the pun). What I want to undertake here is a look at these themes and why they are now appearing in a new guise. Because of the restraints of space, I will give unfortunately short shrift to the equally important question of how homosexuals and homosexual cross-dressers are treated both in this film and by the culture.

Whether the age-old Hollywood stereotypes about homosexuals are simply repeated in *The Bird Cage* or are repeated slightly disguised or, hopefully, have changed for the better is an important question. Unfortunately, most explorations of homosexuality in Hollywood films have been very unsatisfactory. The most famous is Vito Russo's book *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*. There is now a documentary film based on the book. Both suffer from the same unfortunate mistake. Neither looks at *homosexuality* or its implications in films. Rather, both look at *homosexuals* in films. And the portrayal of homosexuals in films has been and, for the most part, is still unfortunately stereotyped.

Homosexuality and homosexuals, however, are a completely different story. Consider, for instance, the ending of *Casablanca* [1942] when Rick (Humphrey Bogart) and Louis (Claude Rains) walk, almost arm in arm, into the foggy horizon to start a life together. If not homosexual, this scene is certainly one of the strongest homo-erotic sights every put on film. It is comforting to know that two such macho role models could actually be such close friends. Images like this – and there are many in very popular films – are accessible to and perhaps even influential on a far broader audience than either the positive or negative portrayal of gays and lesbians in films. Again, the subtext is far more important than the text. (And *Casablanca* is not even mentioned in Russo's book.)

the most important cultural tenet of *The Bird Cage* is that Val, Albert, and Armand's son, is straight, well-adjusted, college-educated, responsible, and about to enter into a traditional heterosexual relationship. In other words, he's “normal.” In the 1940's, we would expect this boy to come from a family featured in films like *It's a Wonderful Life* or *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Obviously, our expectations about family life have changed. It is remarkable that Val's homosexual “parents” form a functional family and he grows up to be a wonderful young man. In fact, he is the only one in his fraternity that “didn't come from a broken home.” This is striking . . . and disturbing. Disturbing for its implication that the typical American family is so dysfunctional that only families on the cultural fringe can produce functional offspring. This film portrays a cultural in desperation.

The film's sense of loss of the functionality of the American mainstream is to some extent counterbalanced by its obviously liberal point of view. The conservative,

homophobic, anti-Semitic (and on and on) Senator Keeley is the one who, as a result of his adventures, changes. He accepts a Jewish son-in-law and a homosexual brother- and sister-in-law. Since he is the one who changes and is happy at the end of the film, it is strongly implied that at the beginning of the film he was wrong.

On the other hand, neither Armand nor Albert change one whit. They learn nothing – beyond the realization that once the Senator agrees with their political point of view, he is a nice person. So, since the film requires neither Albert nor Armand to change, they must have been correct from the beginning. If anything, the experience of trying to be straight and interacting with the Senator and his family deepens their feelings for each other and for their chosen lifestyle (demonstrated in one of the most touching love scenes – all spoken – ever put on film). Thus, we have the right and left not meeting in the middle where both would learn and grow by nurturing each other, but the right moving over to a stationary left. No compromise here.

This same point is made again, near the end of the film when Albert takes off his Mrs. Doubtfire wig to reveal he is a man. The conservative family, however, is now trapped by their own prejudices. Senator Keeley is actually sexually attracted to “Mrs. Coleman,” and has come to respect Albert in his role as a woman. Once out of the closet, Albert thus becomes a cultural oxymoron to them. However, before this can be explored further (too bad it isn’t) the film draws the conservatives into the homosexual drag community. In a hilarious turnabout, Keeley and his wife must put on clothes for the opposite gender and experience, much as Albert and Armand did, the “other.” Again, because of the film’s bias, the conservatives grow for their experience while the homosexuals do not (because, according to the film, they don’t need any growth – they are where they should be).

While *The Bird Cage* may be uncompromising in its politics, it is very observant of comedic etiquette – to present a flourish of healing at the end of a film that explores honestly often painful topics. For this reason, comedies often end with weddings. However, the wedding at the end of *The Bird Cage* goes considerably farther than most in demonstrating a bridging of a seemingly impossible chasm – a true Conunctio, a joining of the opposites. Barbara and Val are married by two religious figures, a pastor and a rabbi. (Though, as I point out above, they do not meet in the center of the bridge over the chasm.)

The political – not personal – representation of homosexuality goes through several phases, with a surprising outcome. If we look at the film from Armand’s or Albert’s point of view – far more difficult than from straight Val’s or Barbara’s – we get a very different picture. We realize that the body of the film concerns homosexuals giving up their form of life and their sense of community for the needs of the heterosexual public: Armand and Albert must give up their relationship, they must redecorate their apartment, replacing, for instance, an erotic painting with a dark crucifix. *They* must change in order to be acceptable to Val’s conservative in-laws-to-be. In essence, they must give up all outward signs of their very functional lifestyle and duck back into the closet.

At each of Val's requests to perpetuate the subterfuge, Armand first refuses. Yet, this example of self-worth and gay pride quickly succumbs to Armand's love for his son. Indeed, the film doesn't stop here in its exploration of the conflict between one's personal life and the desires – no matter how unfair – of one's children. The differences between presentation of gender and the feelings that may conflict or support that presentation are explored many times. The film reminds us that outward presentation of gender – typically clothing and secondary sexual characteristics – are simply on the outside of a human being, part of the Persona. Within these gross characteristics are much finer, internal feelings and emotions. The film, in this way, humanizes everyone, straight and gay. *The Bird Cage* never lets us forget that internal feelings, especially of motherhood, fatherhood and family, transcend outward appearances of gender.

Even the much-maligned conservatives are generously given a just portion of humanity at the end of the film. When, in an outrageous blonde wig and white spangled dress, trying to escape the notice of the press, Senator Keeley turns to Albert and says, "Dance with me. I don't want to be the only girl not dancing," it is a beautiful, subtle and stunning self-revelation. And, in the typical manner of the type of comedy *The Bird Cage* is, the line is tossed off like so much confetti. It almost goes unnoticed, yet it is the very serious heart of this very funny film. No one wants to be the only person not dancing – that is, we all want to have partners, move to a music that envelopes not only the dance floor, but the cosmos; to blend with another person and become a single entity; to dance, ultimately, the dance of life.

The Bird Cage. Directed by Mike Nichols. Written by Elaine May. Distributed by United Artists, 1996.