

## Broken Flowers

An offbeat "road picture," *Broken Flowers* offers a tantalizing premise: a vintage Don Juan is anonymously informed--via an enticing pink letter--that he has a 19-year-old son from one of his old lovers. Spurred on by an eager neighbor, he traverses the country to try to determine which of his one-time ladies is the mother.

The most tantalizing aspect of Jim Jarmusch's new comedy is the casting. Besides Bill Murray as the Lothario, Don Johnston, and Jeffrey Wright as his neighbor, Winston, there is an intriguing quartet of possible mothers: Sharon Stone (as Laura), Frances Conroy (from HBO's *Six Feet Under* as Dora), Jessica Lange (as Carmen), and Tilda Swinton (as Penny). Their range is considerable: Laura is a sexy race-car widow with a Lolita (literally) daughter, Dora and her smarmy husband are into "luxury prefab" real estate, Carmen is a touchy-feely animal communicator, and Penny is all resentful rural poor white trash. In casing all these women's lives, Don tentatively--never directly--seeks out information about the child and keeps seeing enticing bits of pink...signals of her note?

Jarmusch has had a 25-year career as one of the kings of "indie" pictures, writing and directing mostly small scale comedies with rambling storylines and quirky characters. His last effort, *Coffee and Cigarettes*, was an omnibus film full of witty little moments. *Broken Flowers* is in this mold, though with a starrier cast and more elaborate production values. It has received critical praise--it won the Grand Jury Prize at Cannes this year--and it is, at best, a slyly diverting tale.

Its problem for this viewer--and it's a big one--is the by-now-mannered performance of Bill Murray. We meet him as a retired, wealthy, cashed-out computer whiz getting the boot from his latest lover (Julie Delpy) just before he receives the pink letter. The search is not his own idea, but that of the voluble Winston (whose character is of more interest). Johnston, as Murray embodies him, is almost catatonic in his inaction; the idea that he was *ever* a Don Juan seems inconceivable. He sits and stares on his sleek leather couch; he gazes passively from his rental car ("a stalker in a Taurus," he calls himself); he presents himself to each of his former loves with the same bare, unreadable face.

It's a pity, because Bill Murray can be a wonderful comic presence, even a subtle one. Moreover, Jim Jarmusch wanted him for this film, even built it around him (they had worked together on *Coffee and Cigarettes*). For a fellow who earlier had a sometimes manic, sometimes cynical comedic style, Murray has, in recent years, tempered his playing. . There was clear evidence of this calming trend with his performances in consecutive films with Wes Anderson--*Rushmore*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, and, especially, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, where he cultivated an almost drone-like dryness of non-reaction.

With *Broken Flowers*, sad to say, Bill Murray has dialed his comic stylings way down to near immobility--not the best recipe for laughs.

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