

Married Life

In 2002, the film *Far from Heaven* recreated impeccably the mores and look of the early 1950's in America, but filtered through the contemporary sensibility of its director, Todd Haynes. Haynes, however attuned to current times, made his characters as naïve as they would appear from a distance of 50 years. In the new film, *Married Life*, writer/director Ira Sachs also reproduces an earlier epoch—the late 1940's—but does it with a more knowing, sardonic style. It works, and makes for a disquieting, but intriguing comedy-drama.

Married Life, based on an 1949 novel “Five Roundabouts to Heaven” by British novelist John Bingham, describes a tricky rondelay of lovers in a serene upper-middle class LA world, where successful businessman Harry Allen (Chris Cooper) lives with his loving wife Pat (Patricia Clarkson) while their confirmed bachelor friend Richard Langley (Pierce Brosnan) circles round them. But Harry has a secret, a blossoming affair with a striking platinum blonde Kay Nesbitt (Rachel McAdams), with whom, he confides to his friend, “I want to be truly happy.” Trouble is, he still feels such affection for his wife that, rather than crush her spirit and foul her future by revealing the affair, he decides he must kill her. Then Richard, having met Kay at Harry's insistence, falls hard for her too. Needless to say, complications ensue, including a couple of clever and well-earned twists. The working out of this four-part equation is the fun of the movie.

Married Life is a cinematic quartet: Brosnan is the lead violin, telling the tale in smooth over voice and carrying the theme of blind love's drives, McAdams plays second violin, offering sweet high-toned counter themes to the lead, Clarkson offers the warmer, more mature sound of the viola, while Cooper, whose self-imposed dilemma drives the plot, provides the bass underpinning for all the rest.

The enterprise is enhanced considerably by the careful period feel of the movie. Colors, clothes, fabrics, furniture are all rendered convincingly; the look of interiors, offices, restaurants all ring true. The verisimilitude on the screen is countered somewhat by the wry, up-to-date dialogue, such as Richard's shrewd remarks or Pat's openness about sex. What also seems modern in the story is how unaware each protagonist is about the others' inner lives. Clueless, we call it these days.

The quartet stays in tune throughout, all performing an anxious two-part harmony. Chris Cooper is a standout as the thwarted husband-lover, so solicitous to his wife yet so enamored of his cutie. Watching his inner turmoil reveal itself wordlessly across his homely face is a lesson in subtle acting. Brosnan, a showier horse here, has to straddle two roles, too, as best friend and engaging roué; he does both with aplomb. Patricia Clarkson, instead, combines sweet domesticity with a surprising tartness. Young McAdams, the ingénue among veterans, may appear a bit vacant in this company, but she still pulls off enough mystery to entice the contending males.

The motto of *Married Life* might be the summary comment Kay offers to Harry near its end: “We cannot build our happiness on the unhappiness of others.” Still, it seems, they all try to.

(The film is rated “R” for mature themes; running time 90 mins.)

(April 2008)

