

The Cooler

Call this movie a very smart and superbly acted *Revenge of the Nerd*: Lifelong sad sack Bernie Lootz (William H. Macy) works in a casino as a “cooler,” a guy whose very presence or touch brings people bad luck: “People get near me--their luck turns.” He mopes around the Shangri-La, the guy whose cream runs out just when he wants it in his coffee.

Bernie is a hireling of the casino’s manager Shelly Kaplow (Alec Baldwin), an old-time Las Vegas shark who is resisting his corporate bosses (led by Ron Livingston) who want to convert the joint, which still features floor shows with Sinatra knockoffs (one played by Paul Sorvino) into a trendier, more family-friendly place. Bernie has only days to go before he can get out from under his long-term obligation to Shelly, when he falls for a young waitress Natalie (Maria Bello) and--miraculously--she falls for him. Yet just as Bernie’s personal luck turns, his professional luck does too, as his newfound optimism seems to kill his “cooling” touch, and he gets in ever deeper with Shelly, who can’t stand to lose his ace in the hole.

The Cooler, the first film directed by South African screenwriter Wayne Kramer, is wonderfully well-observed, dominated by the almost constant presence of the casino floor where, as Bernie rightly notes, “you never know what time it is.” (A Reno casino under renovation stood in for the Shangri-La.) The story is told cleanly and coolly, with a batch of neat subplots (one features Bernie’s long lost son, Shawn Hatosy) which link nicely to the fate of the three principals.

And the principals shine. Bello, probably best known for a recurring role on TV’s “ER,” makes a fine impression--pretty but not too pretty--as scrambling Natalie, looking unsteadily for her main chance before falling for Bernie. The part has echoes of that played by Elizabeth Shue in *Leaving Las Vegas*, but Bello’s work is more believable, more real. Baldwin is a wonderful Shelly, a role that melds the actor’s qualities of New York wiseacre and charming quipster--mixed with a tincture of real menace. While a villain, he still garners your sympathy as he defends a Vegas gambling tradition which legions of guys like himself have scrambled to maintain.

Macy, best known for his sympathetic loser parts (*Fargo*, *Boogie Nights*) is perfect as Bernie. That lugubrious, hang-dog look and cracking voice have never been better employed than in *The Cooler*, and he even gets to move past the forlorn schmuck to the smitten lover (note, too, his love scenes with Bello are unexpectedly steamy) to become, ultimately, a surprising kind of hero.

(“*The Cooler*” is rated “R” for violence, strong language, and nudity.)

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