

■ Movie review

Martin's 'Shopgirl' is better in print than on screen

The film centers on Mirabelle, an unassuming saleswoman at Saks, and her two disparate suitors

BY KRISTEN GERHARD
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At 60 years of age, Steve Martin has been around the entertainment industry block a number of times, reincarnated in a variety of characters. In the late '70s, he was a wild and crazy guy on "Saturday Night Live." In the '80s, he was an actor-turned-amigo in "Three Amigos" and a deranged dentist in "Little Shop of Horrors." In the '90s, he was America's favorite anxious dad in "Father of the Bride," and recently, he's starred in a few fluffier films, like "Bringing Down the House" and "Cheaper by the Dozen," that have left some fans scratching their heads.

Martin as comedic actor is a role most of America is familiar with, but Martin as playwright, contributor to The New Yorker and scribe of three successful novels is a lesser-known part. In 2001, Martin released his second book, the 130-page novella "Shopgirl," which enjoyed a stay on The New York Times' bestsellers list. Friday, the film adaptation of the book was released nationwide and the public was formally introduced to this alternative Martin.

The film revolves, albeit slowly, around three characters: Mirabelle, Jeremy and Ray Porter. Mirabelle, played by Claire Danes, is a late-twenties single woman with the genuinely unassuming nature of a pubescent girl. When the film opens, she's working at an inconsequential job, selling a product nobody's buying at the glove counter at Saks Fifth Avenue. As an aspiring artist, she'd moved from Vermont to Los Angeles to break into the scene, but she is treading water — full of apprehension in a sea of Type-A personalities — when the audience first meets her.

Jeremy and Ray serve as love interests in Mirabelle's life, despite the fact that she sees little in herself that could

be deemed lovable. She meets Jeremy, played by Jason Schwartzman, first and goes on a few dates with the bumbling young man who stencils fonts on amplifiers for a living and only has enough money to make it to Mirabelle's front door. However, Jeremy fails to hold her interest or treasure Mirabelle as she requires. So when Ray, an older and very successful businessman played by Martin, strides into her life, buys an expensive pair of gloves from her counter and sends them to her home with a card asking her to dinner, she leaps head first into the opportunity to be doted upon.

Essentially, "Shopgirl" is a film about these excruciatingly real relationships, with all the bland and uncomfortable moments included and no rose-colored Hollywood filter applied. Mirabelle and Jeremy's first sexual experience is painfully clumsy and Ray, on his first date with Mirabelle, moves from "date questions" to "date comments" as if the process is simply a formula to which he must adhere. The film is admirable in that it simply tells a story and leaves room for audience interpretation, provoking thought about societal standards of financial responsibility, age discrepancy and communication in romantic affairs without passing any blatant judgments on the issues.

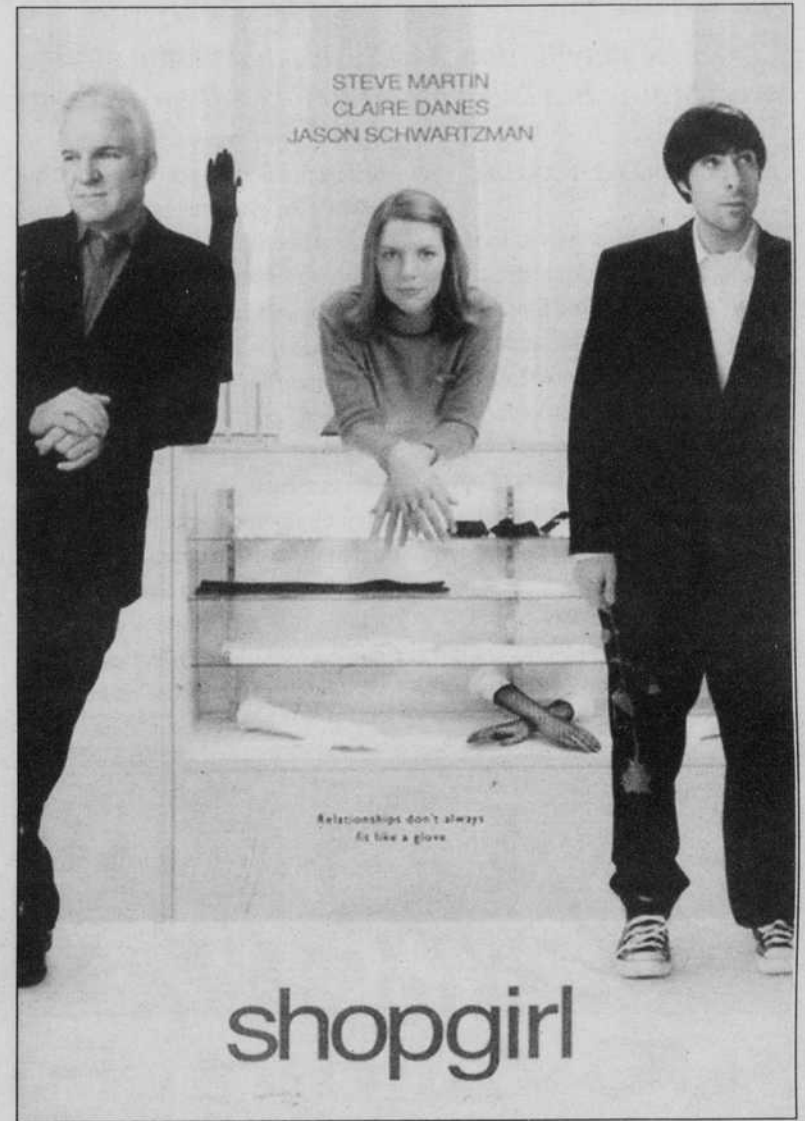
Since Martin adapted the "Shopgirl" screenplay himself, much of the dialogue and exposition translates directly from the book. The characters continue to drive the story more than the plot and the essential moments, such as the evolution of Mirabelle and Ray's relationship from romantic to parental, really shine. In an interview with The Columbus Dispatch, Martin said he did not write the book with a movie in mind, but the transition from

page to screen is quite smooth.

However, many of the points and practical background from the book become too submersed in the film. For instance, in the movie, Mirabelle visits her home in Vermont and the audience catches a glimpse of the dismal life led by her parents. In the text, the reader is able to climb inside Mirabelle's head and hear what she thinks about her mother and father, but in the movie, the viewer is left to posit what the dreary tension at home is all about. There are a few brief moments of exposition by Martin, who serves as an omniscient narrator, that help clarify the storyline and may have proved beneficial in larger doses.

However, Martin's dual roles as both narrator and actor may have been another mistake in adaptation. In the novella, the reader is able to access Ray's inner monologue, making the character more vulnerable and real. Despite his age, he is just as emotionally screwed up as Mirabelle and Jeremy. In the film, however, Ray is associated with the all-knowing narrator making him seem flawless, even though he isn't, thus making him too powerful. What was very admirable about the characters in the book was that they all seemed to have their faults, but this gets lost in the film.

Jeremy, however, is better on screen. His process of self-discovery, which takes place after he and Mirabelle part ways and he takes a journey around the country with a rock band, is underdeveloped in the book but well displayed in the film. Also, Schwartzman brings the role to life in a way that makes him more humorous and oddly lovable, instead of just plain pathetic. However, he plays Jeremy in a manner similar to his roles as Max Fischer in "Rushmore" and Albert Markovski in "I Heart Huckabees," thus coming off funny in a cute, quirky



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way, but inaccessible on a deeper emotional level.

Danes' casting was another good fit. As the meek Mirabelle, she appears appropriately unassuming and almost naive, which belies the intelligence her genuine responses and witticisms in conversation display. She is plain but attractive, making her both lovable and sexually desirable. And she brings back her wholly believable, quivering chin cry that made fans feel for her as Beth March in "Little Women" and Juliet Capulet in "Romeo + Juliet."

Overall, the film is interesting and even manages to squeeze some very

uncomfortable humor out of a serious plotline, but it is not without faults. The pacing is disappointingly slow for an adaptation of a book that one could probably finish in a matter of hours, and for a film that is largely reliant on its characters, the development of emotions and back-stories is lacking. "Shopgirl" will likely please those who have read the book, but leave those who haven't wondering what, after nearly two hours of theater time, they were supposed to take away with them.

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