

**FILM**

This British ensemble drama by Neil Hunter and Tom Hunsinger, makers of the charming 1996 queer indie *Boyfriends*, has been variously called a "gem," a "jewel" and "heartfelt."

But gems can be cloudy, jewels can be paste, and heartfelt might mean it's time for a trip to the cardiologist. *Lawless Heart*, which opens May 16 at Cinema 21, is a well-intentioned, well-acted drama that slips too often into cliché and bathos.

The film reverses the old trend of killing off the homo at the end by doing it at the beginning. Much-loved gay restaurateur Stuart (David Coffey) has kicked, and a disparate group of friends, relatives and lovers show up at his funeral, in the process trying to figure out the messes in their own lives.

His lover Nick (Tom Hollander) is understandably distraught. His brother-in-law Dan (Bill Nighy) is understandably bored with his hetero life and family. His ne'er-do-well childhood pal Tim (Douglas Henshall) is understandably—well, you get it.

They're all in quiet crisis mode but terribly civilized. Even the homophobe, Dan, isn't exactly virulent on the issue, contenting himself with making sotto voce catty remarks about queer promiscuity and flightiness—traits he seems poised to embrace himself. (I know, I know—that's the point.)

Complicating matters is a calm struggle over Stuart's money, with Dan convincing his

## Say cheese

*Lawless Heart* should indeed be illegal

BY GARY MORRIS

homo-simpatico wife to keep it for them rather than giving it to Nick.

The three men's stories intersect and refract off each other in the film's ambitious parallel structuring. Dan meets a zany Frenchwoman who tries to convince him to get more *joie* out of his *vie* by forsaking convention. Tim moves in on Nick, turning his house of mourning into a raucous party palace, complete with thieving guests and strangers fucking in the bedroom. And in a trope that will annoy some viewers while reassuring others, Nick becomes a heterosexual—sort of.

The film has quiet (what else?) moments of humor and charm, as these characters falter toward and away from each other, trying to make that crucial human connection. But these moments are fatally undercut by the film's cheesy impulses. There are endless Kodak moments, montages of brave, stoic, teary faces framed against dramatic beach backdrops or, in a scene that screams for the scissors, adults romping giddily through a playground. Wheeee!

Queer viewers may find Nick the most unsettling character here. It's a little much



Poor deceased Stuart's best friend Tim (left) and lover Nick are pretty pathetic mourners in *Lawless Heart*

in 2003 to see a gay man so passive and disengaged, hovering around the action, accepting any kick in the head—whether Tim's takeover of his house or the attempted theft of his money or a rude worker at his restaurant who he's too much of a doormat to fire. Even when he stands up to

somebody, he apologizes for it later.

Nick is the apotheosis of the silent-suffering homo of pop mythology, more comforting to heterosexuals than he will be credible, or even interesting, to homos. [F]

GARY MORRIS is a writer and reviewer in Portland.

## Plastic-fantastic!

*Down with Love* tweaks those square movies of yesteryear

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

A cocktail-pouring, indulgently ironic replication of the Rock Hudson/Doris Day sex comedies, *Down with Love* is analogous to *Far from Heaven*, but with a difference: Where irony would've missed the point in Todd Haynes' 1950s Technicolor re-visitation, this film is virtually obliged to laugh at itself; when it comes to this stuff, there was never really much of a point to begin with.

The Day/Hudson movies—like 1959's *Pillow Talk* and 1961's *Lover Come Back*—were nostalgic fluff, and they probably felt nostalgic even when they were new. They make perfect daytime TV reruns—comfort viewing for when you've stayed home sick.

Day and Hudson were always verbally suggestive yet physically quite chaste, forever

embroiled in contrived plots and ensconced in plastic-fantastic Manhattan apartments. Here, the dashing Ewan McGregor (as chauvinistic men's magazine writer and swinging bachelor Catcher Block) and perky Renée Zellweger (as best-selling author Barbara Novak, whose women's lib tome, *Down with Love*, discourages gals from falling in love with men and favors careers and self-sufficiency) play out the same sort of scenario, circa 1962.

Before Novak and Block can arrive at their inevitable sexy coupledom, there's conflict, tension and denial enough to cause a zillion double-entendres, deceptions and misunderstandings. Every line and movement seems to



Ewan McGregor and Renée Zellweger are *Down with Love*, opening May 16

have been snappily choreographed, and the design, cinematography and editing—those split-screen telephone conversations!—are for the most part such expert re-creations that the couple's romantic/sexual pursuits play like Warholian pop-art cartoons, making the film a laughing-gas success on its own frivolous, fuss-

free terms. It's insular fun, like a Coen brothers genre-warp minus the bite and obscurity.

David Hyde Pierce co-stars as a fastidious neurotic who is therefore mistaken for gay (ha ha), but the real gay subtext runs deeper. In a cruel irony, Hudson was gay but closeted, while McGregor is straight but often unabashed about having on-screen sex with men.

The actual queerness, though, lies in the film's viewpoint. Its conventional, ritualized heterosexuality—"masculinity" and "femininity," quotation marks well intact—in a time capsule and under glass, can be viewed as highly artificial, constructed and humorous.

Watching McGregor and Zellweger floating around like two bubbles in a pink glass of fizzy champagne feels simultaneously familiar and rather strange. *Down with Love*, which was produced by the *American Beauty* people, affectionately tweaks a square movie genre and its prefab notions of sex and gender on the nose, but in both form and content it also performs a swooning, hi-fi feat of cultural anthropology. [F]

CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN is a Seattle free-lance writer.

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