



Gretchen Mol (left) and Elizabeth Reaser star in the smart romantic comedy *Puccini for Beginners*.

Complicating matters, but making them infinitely more interesting for us, is the lesbian subplot that begins when Mélanie attempts to kiss Ariane after a successful performance. It's hard to tell whether this is just another way for Mélanie to render Ariane dependent on her, or whether there is genuine emotion mixed up with her vengeful sadism, but by the film's end, there's no question which of the two impulses is stronger.

Opens May 11 at Hollywood Theatre. **B+**

—TL

Puccini for Beginners

Writer/director Maria Maggenti made a splash in 1995 with *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love*. The film's romantic tone and smart dialogue made for a winning combination. Her new film took a dispiriting 11 years to get off the ground (where are the financial backers of lesbian romances?) but was worth the wait. *Puccini for Beginners* keeps the romance and snappy patter and adds some surprisingly thoughtful insights into who we are and who we can love.

Like so many contemporary movies in this genre, this one is set in a magical Manhattan, where real locations from local eateries to used bookstores serve as colorful backdrops for the characters' endless intellectual sparring and romantic crises. The star of the story is Allegra (Elizabeth Reaser), a writer who sabotages a nine-month relationship with Samantha (Julianne Nicholson) by refusing to say those three crucial words. When Samantha splits, Allegra is devastated but takes an unexpected turn, hooking up with a Columbia professor, Phillip (Justin Kirk), during a drunken evening. (It doesn't hurt that he's read her last novel.) Before you can say "ménage," a series of comic mishaps occur that find Allegra dating both Phillip and his girlfriend, investment broker Grace (Gretchen Mol). Of course, Allegra doesn't know they're a couple, and that triggers most of the film's plot twists.

Puccini for Beginners gets points for subtly interweaving some challenges to gender expectations—why can't Allegra be with men or women or both?—into what is basically a screwball

comedy. But Maggenti keeps them light enough to avoid weighing down the film. And it doesn't hurt that the three principals deliver their parts with panache. Reaser is especially good in the role of the increasingly dizzy, possibly bisexual Allegra.

I'm not sure if it's a spoiler to say the movie spoils itself during the opening prologue by giving away a crucial plot point. In any case, *Puccini for Beginners* should satisfy fans of *Sex and the City*, which it resembles, as well as devotees of that increasingly visible but still-too-rare genre: the smart, snappy lesbian romantic comedy.

Opens May 4 at Hollywood Theatre. **A**

—GM

The TV Set

In the tradition of Hollywood sendups like *The Player*, writer/director Jake Kasdan (*Orange County*) exposes the nitwit television execs who dumb down risky material for fear of low ratings. Although its message is not exactly groundbreaking, the film is consistently funny and boasts Sigourney Weaver in an exhilaratingly bitchy performance that recalls her Oscar-nominated role in *Working Girl*. David Duchovny stars as writer whose loses creative control of his script for a TV pilot. Justine Bateman, Judy Greer and Philip Baker Hall round out the cast. **B+**

—Stephen Blair

Year of the Dog

Bisexual screenwriter Mike White (*Chuck & Buck*) makes his directing debut with this uneven black comedy about a spinster (Molly Shannon) who fiercely embraces animal activism after her beloved pooch eats poison and dies. It's great to see Shannon land a leading role after years of bit acting, and she proves that she can handle subtle moments along with the demented physical comedy that made her *Saturday Night Live* years so memorable. Regina King and John C. Reilly are hilarious, but the usually reliable Laura Dern and Peter Sarsgaard don't take their characters any place interesting. **B-**

—SB 10

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