



Molly Shannon and Peter Sarsgaard in *Year of the Dog*

In the Doghouse

A different kind of puppy love

YEAR OF THE DOG: Written and directed by Mike White. Cinematography, Tim Orr. Music, Christophe Beck. Starring Molly Shannon, Peter Sarsgaard, John C. Reilly, Regina King, Laura Dern, Thomas McCarthy and Josh Pais. Paramount Vantage, 2007. 97 minutes. PG-13. ★★☆☆☆

Though Mike White has written a good handful of screenplays between 2002's unforgettable, unsettling *Chuck & Buck* and *Year of the Dog*, it's through *Chuck*, on to *The Good Girl* (both directed by Miguel Arteta) and then straight to *Dog* that a tonal and thematic line can be traced. *Dog* mixes the disconcerting personal relationships of *Chuck & Buck* with *The Good Girl*'s directionless ennui — until it turns both around, with uncertain results.

Awkward, skittish Peggy (Molly Shannon) is a single woman with an unremarkable job, a nice enough house and one great love: her dog, Pencil. One night, Pencil wants out and doesn't come back in, and it's no stretch and no spoiler to guess what happens to the peppy little beagle. Peggy is devastated, moping through encounters with her friend Layla (Regina King) and her brother and sister-in-law (a scene-stealing, neurotic Laura Dern). It's animal lover Newt (Peter Sarsgaard), though, who lures Peggy from her mourning: He works matching strays and abandoned pets with new owners, and he's got a troubled dog that desperately needs a home. He also trains dogs, and his divided personality — half oversharing, half withdrawn; accidentally sultry yet asexual — appeals to Peggy, who welcomes his help with her new pooch. Soon, she's following in Newt's footsteps, becoming a vegan and helping him find homes for more dogs. His eyes half closed, his demeanor like that of a touchy mutt, Sarsgaard is perfect in this sort of role. Newt doesn't know when to push and when to let go, and when he takes an emotional decision out of Peggy's hands, the thin line that held her to something like "normality" finally reaches its breaking point.

Year of the Dog is a strange little film, purposefully visually bland and populated by glamourless, believable characters who share a tendency to trip themselves up. Like

White's other focused, intimate films, which sit in a peculiar position between drama and humor, *Dog* is concerned with wounded, foundering people, and White is smart enough to avoid giving any single, ridiculously all-encompassing reason for a person's flaws. Peggy simply is the way she is — the way she discovers she is — and much of the appeal of *Year of the Dog* lies in seeing her begin to explore and stretch within the life



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that's gone unquestioned and unshaken for too long. It isn't always a sympathetic journey, and at times the film feels like an animal rights treatise as Peggy's obsession with saving animals begins to threaten everything that was previously stable in her life. (Some of Peggy's decisions, while meant to illustrate her newfound passion, are too illogical even for this newly obsessed woman.) Still, White's willingness to make his audience uncomfortable is welcome, as is his bravely untidy exploration of the ways love — be it for a person, a pet, an ideal — can (to borrow a line from Joss Whedon) make us do the wacky. **EW**

Year of the Dog opens Friday, May 11 at the Bijou.

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