



Jenna (Keri Russell, flanked by Lew Temple and Cheryl Hines) puts on a happy face in *Waitress*

Bittersweet Triumph

Waitress serves a slice of sweet sorrow

WAITRESS: Written and directed by Adrienne Shelly. Cinematography, Matthew Irving. Music, Andrew Hollander. Starring Keri Russell, Nathan Fillion, Cheryl Hines, Jeremy Sisto, Adrienne Shelly and Andy Griffith. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2007. PG-13. 104 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

There are many things to praise about *Waitress*, a sweet slice-of-life love story served up with a rich handful of vibrant performances and a dizzying array of delectable-looking pies. But the story that precedes the film, which premiered at Sundance in January, isn't so sweet. Last November, the film's writer and director, Adrienne Shelly, was found dead in her New York office. What was originally thought to be an unbelievable suicide later was discovered to be a murder; Shelly had been killed by a construction worker after they argued about noise in the neighboring apartment where the man was working.

The multitasking actress (*Trust*, *The Unbelievable Truth*) and filmmaker left behind family, friends, a young daughter—and a just-finished film that's become a bittersweet triumph. Every story about the film's debut finds cast and crew sad but joyful, happy that the film's been so well-received while heartbroken that Shelly isn't there to see it.

But don't think that has earned *Waitress* only sympathy votes. Shelly's tale of a young woman trapped in a life too small and cramped for her is rich and kind, full of sympathy for its characters and understanding of the strange turns life takes. It's a thoughtfully created story that refrains from taking the easy way out, one admirable on many levels but not least because when our heroine, Jenna (a radiant Keri Russell) tells her new lover, Dr. Pomatter (Nathan Fillion, who ought to be a leading man for years to come), that she doesn't want him to save her, she means it.

Jenna's going to save herself, or at least try to figure out how. Trapped in a marriage to a creepy, needy man (Jeremy Sisto), Jenna steels herself to his clumsy advances and dreams of escaping someday. She works at Joe's Pie Diner, turning out brilliant pies and commiserating with her fellow waitresses, Dawn (Shelly) and Becky (Cheryl Hines, of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*), who agree sadly that even though Dawn has

"pasty, pasty skin" and Becky's breasts aren't level, they wouldn't trade places with Jenna for even a minute. Especially considering she's expecting.

To say Jenna would rather not be pregnant is an understatement. It's also a situation that initially confuses Dr. Pomatter, who's recently taken over the small Southern town's ob-gyn practice. Fillion, who's best known to a relatively small but deeply loyal group of fans for playing Captain Mal Reynolds of *Firefly* and *Serenity*, has a wonderfully nervous presence that Shelly nicely described in the film's production notes by saying, "He's really a big dork, but he looks like Harrison Ford or something." While Jenna is bitterly subservient with her husband, she's no-nonsense with everyone else. "Un-thank you," she tells Dr. Pomatter, jaw set, after he carefully un-congratulates her on her impending motherhood.

Jenna and Dr. Pomatter are clearly meant for each other, despite his nearly-unseen wife and her controlling husband: She's passionate without knowing how to express it, except in her pies, while he's somehow calm and awkward at the same time. "At first," Jenna writes to her future child in a baby book Dawn and Becky give her, "it was just about the sex." But of course it becomes more. Every relationship in the film, from Becky's with a goofy suit-or to Jenna's with the diner's owner, Old Joe (Andy Griffith), grows in believable, gentle ways, shifting with the ebb and flow of life in the nameless town.

Waitress is a loving film, a story Shelly wrote when she was pregnant with her own daughter that reflects a rarely-depicted, deep-seated fear of giving birth alongside a more traditional shift in a new mother's feelings about her child, about the world, about her life. While some pieces of the story are easy to spot before they happen, they still don't deserve the negative tag of "predictable." Instead, they're logical connections that the audience can see though the characters can't. Quirky without being trite, sweet without being sticky, *Waitress* is a portrait of life in transition and a paean to the beauty of finding strength where you least expect it.

EW

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