



The Accidental Feminists

AT LAST, A COMEDY THAT
PASSES THE BECHDEL TEST

By Molly Templeton

In the world of *Late Night*, a woman has been a late-night talk show host for so long that she's become stale. This, of course, is the stuff of fantasy, as a short look at the late-night listings will show you.

Katherine Newbury (Emma Thompson) is in her 50s, imperious and sharp-tongued and more than a little defensive about her position in the landscape of TV. But that place is in jeopardy; a new network head tells Katherine her show is over at the end of the season, and when Katherine fires a writer, he shoots back, telling her she hates women. She's at least never hired one.

Enter Molly Patel (Mindy Kaling), who has no experience, no credits and no connections. But she finagles herself an interview and is in the right place at the right time when Katherine decides to hire a woman. *Any* woman. And though she's earnest and in over her head, Molly is smart, persistent, resilient and funny. And mean, when she needs to be.

Late Night has the plot of a rom-com and, given Molly's eventual "you love me" moment, screenwriter Kaling knows it. And she knows what she's doing with it: giving the relationship between two professional women its due.

I kept expecting to be let down by *Late Night* — for the story to do something predictable with Katherine's ailing husband, Walter (John Lithgow), or for either Molly or Katherine to suffer consequences for being themselves and for being ambitious.

But that's not what happens. The movie isn't without its clichés — in a recent *New York Times* piece, Amanda Hess wrote beautifully about the falsehood of presenting older women as inherently less feminist, and younger women as always more so — but Kaling and director Nisha Ganatra build in nuance wherever possible.

Katherine's flaw isn't that she hates women; it's that she's afraid of losing her place in a sphere that allots very few places to women — and she can't see the role she plays in sustaining that structure. Molly isn't a fresh-out-of-college 22-year-old who magically knows how to fix everything; she's a woman in her 30s who's had some life experience and gradually figures out how to apply it to her job.

The men in Katherine's writing room aren't just clichéd bros; they have some of those habits and flaws, in part because no one's ever suggested they ought to be otherwise.

Late Night could stand to be a little more about Molly, who doesn't have nearly as much outside-of-work screen time as Katherine does. They're partners in a dance, and Katherine is definitely the lead.

And the brief moments when Katherine allows herself to change up her steps serve as powerful reminders of how much she's kept in check. Appearing on the stage of a small theater, Thompson cracks her first genuine smile of the film — a smile that's heartbreaking in its rarity.

When the movie returns to that same small stage for another moment of grace and reconciliation, it underscores the idea that places shape us as much as people do, and that the requirements of Katherine's TV stage are partly why she is the way she is.

For all its many charms — Thompson and Kaling are such a perfect pair I would watch them in anything — this is what elevates *Late Night*, what bumps it up from "delightful workplace comedy" to "movie I will probably watch six times on cable." It doesn't scold or judge its women for who they are.

Their ambitions are valid, as are the choices they've made in pursuit of those ambitions. Their rough edges don't need sanding off; they aren't shamed for being imperfect. There's room to understand both why Katherine grew into the person she is, and why Molly insists that things can be better. Neither of them is wrong. They're just right about different things. (*Bijou Art Cinemas*) ■

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DAILY 12:00 5:20

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MON 11:00 2:00 4:00 7:45 10:00
TUE-THU 11:00 2:00 4:00 7:05 9:30

ROCKETMAN
FRI-SAT 11:15 1:20 4:20 6:20 9:00
SUN 11:15 1:20 4:20 9:15
MON 11:15 1:20 4:20 7:00 9:30
TUE 11:15 1:20 4:20 9:00
WED-THU 11:15 1:20 4:20 6:20 9:00

THE BIGGEST LITTLE FARM
FRI 11:00 1:10 3:15 7:15 9:50
SAT 3:15 7:15 9:50
SUN-WED 11:00 1:10 3:15 7:15 9:50
THU 6/27 11:00 1:10 3:15 9:50

BOOKSMART
FRI-WED 2:30 4:50 7:45 9:30
THU 6/27 2:30 7:45 9:30

DECONSTRUCTING THE BEATLES: REVOLVER
PREMIUM ADMISSION
TUE 7:00

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SAT 11:00
THU 6/27 5:45

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Tuesday 2:15 pm
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