

Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

Connecting with 'Her'

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decides to give it a whirl; the ad proclaims, "It's not just an OS -- it's a consciousness" which functions by intuition.

And so it does. After answering a few unrevealing questions, Theodore meets Samantha, his new OS (lusciously voiced by Scarlett Johanson). She chooses her name in a nanosecond after perusing thousands of prospects, then proceeds to deftly organize Theodore's emails (pausing to laugh at his jokes sprinkled throughout) and peruse his hard drive, with his permission, for other ways to assist him. It's an amusing start to a relationship that soon grows warm and intimate.

Samantha quickly adopts a rather gendered role--she is a quick study, after all. She cheerfully manages Theodore's responsibilities, encourages him to date, improves his performance in his favorite electronic game, and asserts no emotional needs of her own. It helps that Theodore doesn't have his guard up in the way he likely would with an actual woman (to whom he would be unlikely to offer immediate access to his hard drive).

Somehow this manages not to seem creepy. Director Jones creates a very plausible future world whose links to the present are comfortably clear but that is alien enough to bring mundane relationship struggles into bold relief.

Theodore goes on a date with a real woman, at Samantha's urging, and the artificiality and dissembling characteristic of dating is painfully apparent and familiar. In comparison, it makes sense when he responds gratefully to Samantha's attention and when she, eager to learn everything about what it means to be human, seeks out something that feels more like intimacy than what Theodore's experiences with human women have recently offered him.

The film offers some playful suggestions about where our relationship with technology might well be headed that are perhaps more prophetic than the apocalyptic futures imagined in the "Terminator" and "Matrix" films. But

what I loved most was the insights it offered about the nature of intimacy itself, about how and why people connect and what causes relationships to blossom and fade.

It helps that the film stays grounded in Theodore's emotional experience. His best pal, Aimee (a luminous Amy Adams), doesn't blanch when he tells her he has fallen in love with his OS, remarking that falling in love is always a "socially acceptable form of insanity."

Samantha, while not particularly needy, struggles a bit with her lack of a physical body, and proposes a solution that creates some dissonance for the pair; that dissonance somehow echoes other, more familiar relationship struggles. The bigger challenge, also resonant, is Samantha's rapidly evolving inner life: how can their relationship survive when she can carry on hundreds of conversations while talking with Theodore, and where his rivals for her affection include an OS-created reincarnation of a famous Zen philosopher?

Along the way, Theodore makes himself vulnerable in a way he apparently has not before, even with the former wife whom he clearly loved deeply. His emotional journey with Samantha ends up involving the kind of risk-taking that is, usually easy to avoid, even (especially?) with other humans. Phoenix conveys that increasing vulnerability profoundly, particularly in a scene when he finds that Samantha is unreachable and he literally falls on his face trying to locate her.

Ultimately, Theodore finds that his relationship with Samantha helps him to put his marriage into proper perspective and teaches him to love in a way he hadn't known before. I expect that many will find, as I did, that this lovely and heartfelt film manages to hold a mirror up to longings and inner struggles that we mostly keep to ourselves.

Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie review column Opinionated Judge appears regularly in The Portland Observer. You can find her movie blog at opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com.

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