

WHEN HARRY MET SALLY...

Directed by Rob Reiner
Produced by Rob Reiner
Distributed by Columbia Pictures
Released in 1989

"Men and women can never be friends because the sex part always gets in the way." But eleven years after Harry Burns says these words to Sally Albright, they manage to build a friendship on the commonality of messy break-ups. Then the sex thing really gets in the way when they have sex. The friendship is destroyed, but the hope for love burns brighter. Can these two neurotics face up to their feelings?

When Harry Met Sally... redefined what a romantic comedy could be. Though sex is oft discussed, it's never shown. Though love is portrayed as a messy business, we're never forced to watch relationships crumble. Our focus is strictly on the lead characters and their story, together and apart. Drama is leavened with humor except in two scenes—when Sally and Harry argue in front of the brownstone after running into Harry's ex, and when they clash at Marie's wedding over their disintegrating friendship. Because these scenes are so important for revealing character, the absence of humor punches up their significance without sacrificing the buoyant mood of the entire picture.

New York City is portrayed as a wonderland of delights and the combination of jazz-vocal soundtrack and old-couple vignettes provides an irony-laced commentary on the proceedings. The movie is a pure delight and allows the audience to just sit back and have fun. But just when it seems the frivolity is going too far and the movie is poised to demean sex as a mere recreational activity (the batting-cage scene), it's clearly demonstrated that true intimacy can only be nourished in a secure relationship. Sex has consequences.

"I'm not saying it didn't mean anything. I am saying, Why does it have to mean everything?"

"Because it does!"

The performances are effective, with top marks going to Billy Crystal. He plays a charming cad and a depressed, self-obsessed jokester like he was born that way, which he probably was. Though he is often more compelling than Meg Ryan, they have a genuine chemistry that makes casting directors melt. Of course, great performances are built on the foundation of an incredible script, and this one takes full advantage of its super-smart upper-income New York characters; they toss witticisms back and forth like they're playing catch.

Meg Ryan radiates a beguiling innocence that plays against her character's intelligence and sexual experience in complex ways. Though we've got Harry pegged from the start, we don't know what to make of Sally. Harry is always his comfortably offensive self while Sally has a lot more room for development, because she really thinks all the world is a stage. She's hiding a lot.

The lighting and make-up work on Meg Ryan is glorious. Hers is a face that loves to be photographed. One of the surefire ways to take a viewer out of a movie is for one character to

observe something to which the audience says, *Where'd you come up with that?* For example, in any number of horror movies, characters convey their feelings about unseen persecutors. Our imaginations (considerably aided by spooky music) fill in the details. But when we are shown *The Creature*, all too often our worst fears go sadly unrealized. Once the foreboding visage is revealed in a blood-curdling anti-climax, the undwhelmed audience members, considering the proceedings unintentionally humorous, stop watching the movie and start disassembling it. But in our movie, when Harry marvels at Sally's beauty, the subsequent shot of her reaction doesn't disappoint. She looks good. As Harry says, "I don't think it's a matter of opinion. Empirically, you are attractive." It's easy to see how a long-standing friendship could be permanently derailed by the dirty realities of sex. And though we are often told (rather than shown) what a character is all about, this (normally cheap, short-cut device) is welcomed, because it reveals how characters feel about each other. For example, Harry yells at Sally because she doesn't express any sadness over her break-up with Joe. And as evidence, he says the fact she hasn't slept with anyone since the break-up proves she hasn't dealt with it emotionally. But she will not become a serial sex-avenger like Harry. She rightly observes that, as Harry hasn't gotten over Helen, he can't castigate Sally for mourning, in her own way, the five years she lost with Joe. Those emotional issues must be dealt with spiritually, not physically; she will sleep with somebody when it is making love.

We could have gathered as much, but now, with their views clearly defined, when they do sleep together, we recognize that Sally is choosing Harry as the man she really wants. Consequently, they can't be friends, not necessarily because they have slept together, but because Harry doesn't feel for Sally what she's demonstrated she feels for him.

She complicates matters by renewing her coquettish act, breezily dismissing the episode as a mistake. To her it was a mistake because she slept with a man that doesn't love her. To him it was a mistake because he just wants to be friends, and anything that jeopardizes that (even great sex) pales in importance. He thinks she thinks they can still be friends, but her behavior says otherwise, leaving him more confused than ever.

So not until he stops trying to be her friend does their ill-defined romance find resolution in the reassuring solidity of marriage. Their bizarre courtship has yielded unexpected fruit, for while they shared the same interest—finding love—they never thought they'd find it in each other. *When Harry Met Sally...* proves that even the most modern of stories can end happily ever after.