

MOVIE REVIEW

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The Switch

Same old act for Aniston in 'The Switch'

By Wesley Morris, Globe Staff | August 20, 2010

The romantic comedy has never had a star as depressing as Jennifer Aniston. It's not the movies — well, it isn't simply the movies. "Picture Perfect," "The Object of My Affection," "Along Came Polly," "Rumor Has It," "Management," "The Bounty Hunter": This is in-flight entertainment grating enough to send more than a fed-up flight attendant shrieking down an inflatable slide.

Aniston is also distressing because she's the genre's most modern star. In her, the timeless goal of the romantic comedy (falling in love) now intersects with the specific desperate straits of certain single women (manlessness, childlessness, the quest for perfection). The depressing part is that the women Aniston plays rarely seem depressed by this. For her, loneliness, doubt, fear, sadness, and worry are not emotions. They're shades of a nail polish her pedicurist isn't allowed to use.

Aniston gives real problems the same skeptical stammer and crypto-ditzy insouciance that made her a great television star. Her limitation in the movies is that she's impervious to growth. If Diane Keaton and Meg Ryan were the same in their comedies (choosy, neurotic, insatiable), they could rely on their principles to guide them. In fact, Ryan got so good at idealism that it warped her. Those inflated lips didn't ruin her career; cynicism did. She changed, the movies didn't, and the tension began to chafe.

That won't be a problem for Aniston. Her adventures in good movies, like "The Good Girl" and "Friends With Money," never make her better — or different — in bad ones. In "The Switch," she plays a New Yorker who so wants a baby that she places an online ad for a sperm donor. This is only mildly different from "The Object of My Affection." Gay Paul Rudd is now not-gay Jason Bateman, whose character, Wally, is in love with Kassie (Aniston).

Kassie wants to stay friends with Wally — he's a financial guy who's too neurotic for her. So for the father, she chooses a better-looking, more seemingly conventional man, a stranger named Roland (Patrick Wilson). Inebriated at her insemination party (it's the sort of weird event the movie wants us to believe all unmarried women are doing), Wally winds up replacing Roland's sperm with his.

Until that point, the movie loosely resembles "Baster," a Jeffrey Eugenides short story that was published in 2006. The story was more complicated. Wally and Kassie — Eugenides named her Tomasina — once dated. She got pregnant and aborted the child. His psyche never quite recovered. Neither did hers. It's an excellent consideration of narcissism, beauty, and social expectation. Needless to say, "The Switch" is not. Allan Loeb wrote the script. Josh Gordon and Will Speck directed. What they've done is concoct something gimmicky and banal.

Kassie leaves for a number of years and returns with a soon-to-be 6-year-old son (Thomas Robinson) who is a wee Wally: a joylessly self-aware hypochondriac. None of the scenes between Aniston and Bateman work. Only in a screwball comedy would a man this uptight tolerate a woman whose life is as arbitrary as Kassie's.

The more honest movie would have paired him with Juliette Lewis, who plays Aniston's best friend. Lewis does her job with as little seriousness as she can get away with. We're often supposed to believe that Aniston's characters are free-spirited and spontaneous. In the future, she should make sure Lewis hasn't been hired for the same comedy. She makes Aniston seem dull, which isn't usually true of her. In any case, the usual girlfriends-on-the-treadmill chitchat takes place between Bateman and Jeff Goldblum, as Wally's best friend.

Eventually, the filmmakers tire of Kassie and her pursuit of Roland. They appear to realize that the best relationship in the film is between Bateman and Robinson, who has the scary-wonderful savant quality of a child sure to attract a "60 Minutes" correspondent. It's similar to what Hugh Grant underwent in "About a Boy."

Wally and his secret son explore New York, and you can feel them falling in a kind of love with each other. They don't merely catch up with Kassie emotionally. They evolve beyond her. This is bad news for Aniston. It's also the inverse of the Meg Ryan problem. The movie changes, and she doesn't. If a Jennifer Aniston movie doesn't actually need Jennifer Aniston, do we?

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