

Romantic comedy with an awkward family focus

Written by Pierce Gardner

Directed by Peter Hedges

Steve Carell ... Dan Burns

Juliette Binoche ... Marie

Dane Cook ... Mitch Burns

Alison Pill ... Jane Burns

Brittany Robertson ... Cara Burns

Marlene Lawston ... Lilly Burns

Dianne Wiest ... Nana

John Mahoney ... Poppy

Emily Blunt ... Ruthie Draper

Dan Burns: What don't I understand, Cara? Please, help me out. What is it? Is it frustrating that you can't be with this person? That there's something keeping you apart? That there's something about this person that you can connect with? And whenever you're near this person, you don't know what to say, and you say everything that's in your mind and in your heart, and you know that if you could just be together, that this person would help you become the best possible version of yourself?

Steve Carell is fast becoming a Hollywood go-to guy, especially for (sort of) original comedies: *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Evan Almighty*, and *Get Smart*. But in less-comedic 'real life' roles as well, such as the suicidal, homosexual scholar brother-in-law in *Little Miss Sunshine* and now this romantic comedy, *Dan in Real Life*, which starts out with a considerable patch of pathos. As in *Sleepless in Seattle*, the leading fellow must persevere with children following the death of the wife and mother everyone loves and misses desperately.

Dan is of all things a budding advice newspaper columnist who regularly comments on family matters. He has three daughters, a young one Lilly (Marlene Lawston) in the 5-7 range, and two less-young—Jane (Alison Pill) and Cara (Brittany Robertson)—in the 13-16 range. I'm guessing the plainer, more responsible Jane is the older of the two because she's recently acquired her driving learner's permit. Cara is the apparent 13-year-old sextpot wannabe who just knows she's madly in love with Marty (Felipe Dieppa), and can't understand why her father wants to ground her for dissembling in order to see the boy.

The movie begins on the eve of a special, annual long weekend with Dan's family in a large cottage by a quaint Rhode Island seaside town. As Dan and his girls prepare for school on the day of departure, we see clearly and efficiently the nature of the relationships between the father and each of his daughters. Carell does an excellent job of showing, through expression only, just how much he loves his daughters and how truly devastated he is on the inside from the loss of his wife. In fact, that ability to convey quite clearly without words the pain—or the elation or humor or whatever—he is supposed to be feeling is a special quality of Steve Carell's acting.

Anyway, the four of them arrive at the cottage—which as Roger Ebert points out in his review is a sprawling estate that would easily fetch \$20 million, seemingly putting it out of the price range of Dan's regular, just-folks parents, played deftly by John Mahoney and Dianne Wiest. On a trip into town, Dan visits a local bookstore where he "meets cute" a woman named Marie (Juliette Binoche). He is obviously smitten. They fall into a long conversation in which Dan basically does a core dump about his unenviable, sad life situation—but he really does so only because Marie exudes an empathy to embrace all empathies.

Definitely a 'moment'... for both of them.

But before he gets the chance to find out anything about her, she realizes she's late for a date and rushes off. And he needs to get back to the "cottage" for the big family dinner.

Then this is the point where a reviewer has to exercise discretion about revealing too much plot. [So potential spoiler alert: this paragraph and the next one give away the foundation of the plot... at least where Dan and Marie's relationship is concerned.] But Ebert lets us know, and it really is simply part of the

setup, so here goes: Turns out Dan's brother Mitch (Dane Cook) has a new girl friend, a hottie-keeper. Mitch has a reputation as a lady's man, but this time he appears head over heels in love with, never guess, Marie... who is introduced as Mitch's paramour at that very day's family dinner.

All right, so I'm sure this has happened before in the movies where siblings are attracted to the same person. But the writer and/or director really handle the situation with the right level of awkwardness that we've all been subjected to at one time or another in our family lives. Indeed, Dan's family—all 15 or 20 of the adults, including sisters, brothers, and in-laws—makes you squirm for their overwhelming, suffocating attentiveness to poor old Dan's loneliness. They want so much for him to find romantic happiness, or even just get laid, that his embarrassed anguish leaps off the screen... especially now that he's been crushed even further by learning that Marie, his new hope to end all hopes, has been snatched away.

The story all washes out eventually in typical romantic-comedy fashion. Carell is just about perfect for this kind of role. So good, in fact, that I have a hard time watching much of the movie for its authentic discomfiture. But Juliette Binoche—originally a French actress who hit the big time in English-speaking movies, winning an Oscar for best supporting actress in *The English Patient* (1997) and being nominated for best actress in *Chocolat* (2003)—probably saves the film from what else might be a formulaic Hollywood jaunt with brand name actors. (John Mahoney and Dianne Wiest make smaller contributions by turning in performances that in lesser hands might detract.)

And the youngsters do fine. With young actors, one never knows who will climb from an inauspicious child role to the pinnacles of the profession. (I'm thinking Jane Fonda in *Barbarella*. She wasn't technically a child in that role... but she did win Oscars in *Klute* (1972) and *Coming Home* (1979). Plus, she was totally hot in *Barbarella*, as I recall... but I digress (and show age... and possibly some chauvinism), sigh.)

I do have a sense with a movie such as *Dan in Real Life* that I'm watching a lot of the underlying moviemaking machinery—from the selection of established actors such as Mahoney and Wiest, the acquiring of the two romantic leads Carell and Binoche, and some of the ancillary characters such as Dane Cook as Mitch and Emily Blunt as Ruthie (a former classmate of Dan's who's a late bloomer), to the Waltonesque surroundings. But it's okay to see 'the man behind the curtain' occasionally. Plus it's nice to set a movie in the cities and seascape of Rhode Island for a change.

Worthy effort, seven stars.

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