

## CLUELESS

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*Entertaining teen parody is ode to penetrating, clever use of American language* \_\_ 8/10

*Written by Amy Heckerling*

*Directed by Amy Heckerling*

Alicia Silverstone ... Cher Horowitz

Stacey Dash ... Dionne

Brittany Murphy ... Tai

Paul Rudd ... Josh

Donald Faison ... Murray

Elisa Donovan ... Amber

Breckin Meyer ... Travis

Jeremy Sisto ... Elton

Dan Hedaya ... Mel Horowitz

Wallace Shawn ... Mr. Wendell Hall

Twink Caplan ... Miss Toby Geist

Justin Walker ... Christian

*Cher: So like, right now for example. The Haitians need to come to America. But some people are all, "What about the strain on our resources?" Well it's like when I had this garden party for my father's birthday, right? I put RSVP 'cause it was a sit-down dinner. But some people came that like did not RSVP I was like totally buggin'. I had to haul ass to the kitchen, redistribute the food, and squish in extra place settings. But by the end of the day it was, like, the more the merrier. And so if the government could just get to the kitchen, rearrange some things, we could certainly party with the Haitians. And in conclusion may I please remind you it does not say RSVP on the Statue of Liberty. Thank you very much.*

### ***So is Wright off his rocker?***

Last week the Coffee Coaster proprietor reviews one of the more magical movies of all time, *Dances with Wolves*, that won seven Oscars and catapulted Best Director Kevin Costner into more aspiring starlets' beds than even Wilt Chamberlain thought possible. This week *The Brian* grovels among the plebeians praising cheap *Valley Girl* spoofs as if they're worthy of Shakespeare. Well...

Fact is, if one tries to put aside all preconceptions of idle-rich teenagers attending high school in Beverly Hills in 1995... one is going to be fighting a difficult internal battle. So don't even try. Accept that the universe Cher Horowitz (Alicia Silverstone) and her friends inhabit is tailored to superficial offspring of "the Hollywood beautiful set" preoccupied with far more style than substance. But then sit back and let a precocious writer/director (Amy Heckerling) breathe real life into these young people with a gentle satire that has you sympathizing with them.

Plot is basic teen movie material, where boy—Paul Rudd plays Josh, Cher's ex-stepbrother[1] from a former marriage of Cher's father—meets girl through a circuitous route in "the Valley." But the theme of the movie is greater than the plot. The theme is an incisive yet kind exploration of the lives of three genuine center-of-the-universe Valley Girls: Cher and her two friends, Dionne (Stacey Dash) and, later, Tai (Brittany Murphy). Cher, via Alicia Silverstone's voice, narrates throughout... and, as I surmised in

my previous review of *Dances with Wolves* and its comments on *The Waltons*, that literary thread can make a so-so movie an ah-so movie.

### ***Valley Girls with a Twist***

Great is relative, of course, and the scale of *Clueless* (and its comedic nature) doesn't hold a candle to the majesty of *Wolves* or the universal insights of family in *The Waltons*. But it slices and dices Valley culture so finely with the English language that it practically ends the Valley Girl stereotype. As I think back to my first watching of the DVD, which was probably late '96, I remember how the slang of the Valley Girl phenomenon was making the rounds in the Hinterland. "Omigod, totally, gag me with a spoon" are phrases that spring to mind now. And my take on such girls was they were total airheads with the IQ of mustard.

Heckerling turns that doltish attribute on its ear. Cher and Dionne are not dumb at all; in fact they are so self-absorbed that they make extra work for themselves reading (to stimulate vocabulary and knowledge), working out, and eating well; they even allot special time to care for others—e.g. Cher is always looking after her father Mel (Dan Hedaya) to make sure he eats right. Then there are the social areas, particularly fashion. These girls are no slouch here either; Cher may not be Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada*, but she sure knows her fashion lines from Donna Karan to Mercedes Hill.[2]

Don't let the lead-in quote above fool you: No, Cher's not about to join the debate team, but she takes great pride in getting what she wants... which is the best of everything. In fact, at one point she contrives with Dionne to improve her grade in a class by improving the life of the sorry old Mr. Hall (Wallace Shawn). So what does Cher want? Ah hah! When the "clueless," "toe-up" new girl Tai (Brittany Murphy) shows up in their gym class, Cher and Dionne throw themselves into making Tai over... decking her out, styling the hair, improving her accent, and introducing her to eligible boyfriend material. Now the main conflict enters:

Dionne has a boyfriend, Murray (Donald Faison), a high schooler like them. It's beginning to look like clueless-project Tai is going to find one, too. Cher, 16, has decided to save herself for someone outside this dismal world of boys who dress like bobble-head toys and have the social maturity of skateboards. In fact, she carries on about such matters:

"So okay, I don't want to be a traitor to my generation and all but I don't get how guys dress today. I mean, come on, it looks like they just fell out of bed and put on some baggy pants and take their greasy hair—ew—and cover it up with a backwards cap and like, we're expected to swoon? I don't think so."

She wants a man, at least a boy from college, closing in on 21. And in fact she has been saving herself, romantically and sexually, for the right guy. So when this cute boy, Christian (Justin Walker), transferring in from another school, shows up at the door of her English class, with his sweater thrown over his shoulder looking like a model out of *GQ*[3], Cher feels she has finally located Mr. Right. Which sets off a string of complicated silly-girl behaviors calculated to make him want her: such as sending herself flowers and writing herself love letters, so that he is sure to be watching her.

And wearing revealing outfits:

"Sometimes you have to show a little skin. This reminds boys of being naked, and then they think of sex."

And so it goes. There's an ensemble quality to this little movie, and writer Heckerling weaves the stories of the subordinate characters seamlessly with the main thread of Cher's series of conflict resolutions. The story remains light and entertaining all the way, never letting the self-discoveries of the characters send them down a spiral of gloom.

### ***Creative English***

Well, I mentioned at the outset that what sets *Clueless* apart for me is the use of words. Apart from being exposed to a galaxy of bright new terms and expressions from that young, privileged world of the mid-90s, e.g.

- Betty = hot babe
- Baldwin = hot guy
- Barney = loser guy
- Monet = looks all right far away but no good up close
- nice stems = nice legs
- surfing the crimson wave = having your period
- spark a doobie = light a marijuana cigarette
- Jeepin' = having sex in a vehicle

... we get intelligent, witticisms and dialog in virtually every frame:

"Isn't my house classic? The columns date all the way back to 1972."

"Searching for a boy in high school is as useless as searching for meaning in a Pauly Shore movie."

"Dionne and her boyfriend Murray are in this dramatic relationship. I think they've seen that Ike and Tina Turner movie too many times."

Amber: Ms. Stoeger, my plastic surgeon doesn't want me doing any activity where balls fly at my nose.

Dionne: Well, there goes your social life.

Cher: If it's a concussion, you have to keep her conscious, okay?

Ask her questions.

Elton: What's seven times seven?

Cher: Stuff she knows.

Okay, so maybe I'm overrating this one, but I feel *Clueless* is one of the more ingenious, and classic films to have been produced on American culture... or subculture. It somehow assures us that under the surface, all the good and kind people are pretty much the same across all social microcosms, and the universe is benevolent for them after all.

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[1] Does anyone know if one becomes an ex-stepsibling when the marriage of the respective siblings' parents breaks up either by death or divorce? This would apply to yours truly, and I've never had it explained to me.

[2] Just kidding about Cher knowing the Mercedes Hill line. MH is a maternity clothing design house and maker, owned by my niece Brenna Ballard. Check her site out.

[3] Formerly, *Gentleman's Quarterly*, a longstanding, style-setting men's magazine.

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*Clueless | Alicia Silverstone | Amy Heckerling | Paul Rudd | Santa Monica*