

SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE

One of the favorite movie romances of all time, and for good reason __ 9/10

Story by Jeff Arch

Screenplay by Nora Ephron

Directed by Nora Ephron

Tom Hanks ... Sam Baldwin

Meg Ryan ... Annie Reed

Ross Malinger ... Jonah Baldwin

Rosie O'Donnell ... Becky

Rita Wilson ... Suzy

Bill Pullman ... Walter

David Hyde Pierce ... Dennis Reed

Barbara Garrick ... Victoria

Doctor Marcia Fieldstone: *Tell me what was so special about your wife?*

Sam Baldwin: *Well, how long is your program? Well, it was a million tiny little things that, when you added them all up, they meant we were suppose to be together... and I knew it. I knew it the very first time I touched her. It was like coming home... only to no home I'd ever known... I was just taking her hand to help her out of a car and I knew. It was like... magic.*

Reviewing such cultural icon as Sleepless in Seattle is always a challenge— though more of a challenge for (more) professional movie critics who often seem to go to lengths to prove they don't pander to popular opinion simply because it is so popular. And I certainly lack the technical grasp of the filmmaker's art that most critics will acquire in their formal education and journalistic experience these days. But that's all right, because I feel my blue collar in these matters puts me in the category of a longshoreman philosopher (ref. Eric Hoffer) or Gonzo journalist... someone who can provide a better view for being part of the scenery.

Looking at the IMDb page for Sleepless, I'm amazed that it's rated—by the general public—at only 6.6 out of 10! (To give you a comparison, the movie I reviewed last week, Last Chance Harvey, comes in at an even 7.0.) It's as if people, like the critics, don't want to cave in to the overtly sentimental quality of this story for fear they'll be less than objective. But I don't have any such compunctions. Sleepless is an objectively dynamite movie from every angle: writing, directing, acting, music, cinematography. And especially sentimentality. :)

Sure, I've seen it several times. It picks me up. Every time I notice something new. On this latest occasion, I realize that the opening sequence of scenes—from the funeral for Sam Baldwin's (Tom Hank's) wife, the reception, to the scene at work in Chicago where he tells his supervisor he's leaving for Seattle for a complete change of life—sets up the whole movie in about three minutes... The economy is startling, like a mathematical proof or solution to a chess problem by Bobby Fisher. Not only efficient, but lyrical, considering the subject matter.

Not giving anything away, everyone knows the film tells the story of a great and hopeful long-distance love connection between Sam and Annie Reed (Meg Ryan) following the death of his first wife, the love of his life, "a great and perfect thing." After Sam moves to Seattle with his boy Jonah (Ross Malinger), he's still having trouble forgetting... he's

"sleepless." One night Jonah calls into a nationwide nighttime radio show that concerns itself with personal problems, more or less tricking his father into expressing all the angst of his situation on the air.

Annie, a reporter in Baltimore, is in the audience, along with thousands of women who feel his pain. But Annie is "the one," the one who we know will be another great love as he felt for his late wife, "...like magic." The remainder of the movie sees the tender development of their connection into a less-and-less remote affair. Speaking of which, *An Affair to Remember*—the ultimate chick flick starring Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr—should get billing as a *Sleepless* cast member. Like that 1957 gem, this one brings together two very classy individuals in the city of New York at the end of a hectic emotional voyage of discovery.

So one might ask, since we know what will happen why bother watching? Of course, the answer is, "For the same reason we watch *The Bourne* movies or *A Christmas Story* time after time." They inspire or entertain us, help us look on the bright and hopeful side. What I like about *Sleepless*, aside from the pure artistic economy, is the heart, soul, and humor of it all.

Let me first comment on the extraordinary acting ability of Meg Ryan.

Shortly after she (Annie) hears Sam on the radio (and is thinking of legitimate ways to meet him), she's lying awake in bed with her hypochondriac/hyperallergic fiance Walter (Bill Pullman). She can't sleep, so she rises and goes downstairs to the kitchen. On the soundtrack, Carly Simon sings "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning." Annie turns on the radio. They're repeating the segment where the psychologist Dr. Marcia Fieldstone asked the probing questions of Sam a couple of nights ago.

Annie sits facing the camera and listening to Sam's heartwrenching dialog with Dr. Marcia; she's peeling an apple in one continuous slice (as we eventually learn Sam's wife used to do). Not saying a word, simply gazing off into space, she listens as Sam describes what he's going to do:

Well, I'm gonna get out of bed every morning... breath in and out all day long. Then, after a while I won't have to remind myself to get out of bed every morning and breath in and out... and, then after a while, I won't have to think about how I had it great and perfect for a while....

As Sam then conveys what was so special about his wife—the quoted passage at the top of the review—Meg sets down the apple, reaches up and runs those elegant sculpted, long fingers through her hair, gently moving it to the side; she glances around with a silent sigh and swallow, shakes her head lightly. Her eyes smile as she mentally utters the words Sam is saying, "it was like... magic," and the tears well up and flow down her cheeks. She is hopelessly, deeply in love with this man. And the entire scene from the bedroom to "magic" takes place in roughly two and a half minutes!

As I indicated above, I'm not someone whose studied film or acting, and don't know the difference between hitting one's marks or the proper sequencing of camera angles. But I do know this, absolutely and for certain: the character Meg Ryan creates in Annie Reed is as real as we are... and every bit as worthy of our affections. I also probably don't have to tell you that Tom Hanks contribution to the reality, through the pace and gravity of his lines—the ability to likewise project his feelings transcontinentally—is sine qua non off the charts. These two are MFEO[1] and on the same stellar esthetic wavelength.

I could probably talk about this one perfect scene for a dozen more paragraphs, but I'll simply let it go with: "This sort of artistry is what makes my day about movies." Like a pure-Detroit sports fan seeing the Red Wings carrying aloft the Stanley Cup, etc., etc. [As another example, in other movies I've reviewed, there's a scene in Ulee's Gold between Ulee (Peter Fonda) and his neighbor lady-friend Connie (Patricia Richardson) where Patricia Richardson comes up with the same sort of "magical" moment and in a similar mundane domestic setting.]

It should also be stated that Sleepless interweaves a healthy handful of naturally humorous incidents—Rosie O'Donnell as Becky, Annie's best friend; David Hyde Pierce playing her neurotic psychiatrist brother; Bill Pullman with intensive-care-level allergies; Rob Reiner playing Sam's coworker in Seattle; Jonah ahead of his years; Victoria, the woman at work with whom Sam succumbs to planning to 'relieve his manly needs'; and so on—at strategic places in the structural marvel of the plot. And music. I'll simply list the key tunes and artists performing them:

Song	Artist(s)
As Time Goes By	Jimmy Durante
In the Wee Small Hours	Carly Simon
A Wish and a Smile	Harry Connick, Jr.
Back in the Saddle Again	Gene Autry
Stand By Your Man	Tammy Wynette
Somewhere Over the Rainbow	Ray Charles
Bye Bye Blackbird	Joe Cocker
Stardust	Nat King Cole
Make Someone Happy	Jimmy Durante
When I Fall in Love	Celine Dion, Clive Griffin

As with the humor, the music precisely fits the drama (or comedy) on the screen. And the movie theme piano score—occasionally spelled by the theme music from An Affair to Remember—subtly ties everything together.

So this is a great one. I would give it a 10 except I don't want my readers to think I've become a hopelessly sloppy schmaltzburger.

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[1] made for each other

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