

MONTHLY MOVIES

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Love in the time of COVID-19

By T. Rob Brown

Is it the result of fate or fortunate accidents?

Perhaps for the hopeless romantic, love is as Dean Kasky (Jeremy Piven) wrote in a mock obituary for his friend Jonathan Trager (John Cusack): "... not a series of meaningless acts or coincidences, but a tapestry of events that culminate in an exquisite sublime plan."

From its chase to find the signed copy of "Love in the Time of Cholera" with the phone number of Sara Thomas (Kate Beckinsale) to its look at signs and portents, I believe one of the greatest romance films ever created outside of "Casablanca" (1943) was "Serendipity" (2001).

Cusack and Beckinsale lead this film about one of life's greatest questions: Is there someone out there we're destined to be with? A soulmate, if you will.

In this film, those signs go so far that at one point someone utters the line, "Maybe the absence of signs is a sign." But there certainly is neither absence of signs nor irony nor coincidence in the flick. From Jonathan hearing the name "Sara" again and again to Sara seeing a poster of Jonathan's favorite movie "Cool Hand Luke" (1967), and then she finally finds the \$5 bill with his name and phone number on it right in the purse of her best friend, Eve (Molly Shannon).

One might think that level of coincidence would seem unbelievable but watching the film gets you rooting for Jonathan and Sara to find each other once again. Sure, it follows the basic rules of the three-act structure for romance films: 1. The destined soulmates meet. 2. Circumstances force them

apart—such as a misunderstanding or a hostile third party forces them apart. 3. One overcomes the opposition so they can reunite. What this film does is twist that formula ever so slightly like a squirt of lime in your Coca-Cola. Rather than a misunderstanding or a hostile third party, the couple is initially separated by Sara's own belief in the power of destiny.

"Serendipity," rated PG-13, runs 1 hour and 30 minutes. It received a low score of 59% on Rotten Tomatoes but the audience rated it much higher at 79%. It received 6.9/10 on the International Movie Database.

Fate would have it that sometimes the history of a movie is determined by the cast who finally land the roles that made the film famous. "Pretty in Pink" (1986) is certainly no exception to this rule.

Not too many people know that early on, Charlie Sheen was considered for the role of Blane McDonough but star Molly Ringwald (Andie Walsh) convinced filmmakers to cast Andrew McCarthy instead. "Tiger Blood" denied. If Ringwald had her way, the role of Philip F. "Duckie" Dale (Jon Cryer) might have went to another big future star who would later end up becoming the father figure for the entire Marvel Cinematic Universe. Yes, Robert Downey Jr. himself.

Initially, Anthony Michael Hall, who starred in four of John Hughes' other films, turned down the role of Duckie because he was avoiding a typecast situation. Though a "Brat Pack" film, it didn't feel quite as such without Hall.

Even the role of Andie wasn't offered right off the bat to Ringwald. Jennifer Beals turned down the role. Jodie Foster and Sarah Jessica Parker were among the list of those considered before Ringwald landed the part.

So among all those alternate casting choices that might have been, Downey almost played Duckie. Ringwald even said that if Downey had been chosen, the original ending would have worked.

In the original script, Andie and Duckie were supposed to end up together but audiences hated that ending. So the director rewrote and reshot the ending so Andie would end up with Blane. Even so, a lot of viewers thought it seemed weird for her to choose the rich guy over the close friend who secretly pined away for her. The novelization by H.B. Gilmour (1986) includes the original ending.

In the book "You Couldn't Ignore More If You Tried: The Brat Pack, John Hughes, and Their Impact on a Generation," Ringwald said she wanted Downey to play Duckie but she understood that since the script changed, it made sense for Cryer to play the part.

This created some tension between Ringwald and Cryer, though. In the DVD commentary for "Pretty in Pink: Everything's Duckie Edition," Cryer laments that, "Molly dropped the bomb that she would've been fine with the original ending if Robert Downey Jr. had played Duckie ... But since it was me, she just couldn't see it. It was like, 'Wow, so I'm that unattractive?' Thanks, Mol."

Later, Ringwald was quoted as responding, "I feel bad saying that I really fought for Robert Downey Jr., because it sort of seems like I don't appreciate Jon's performance, which I totally do—it's just, it really did affect the movie."

Director Howard Deutch spoke with Fatherly online to explain the situation: "The original ending was Duckie gets the girl. That was what the script was, and what I was executing. When we showed it to

the audience, they rejected it. They wanted her to get the cute boy she wanted. To them, forget the politics, it was, 'She wants the cute boy. She wants Andrew.' We had to figure out a way to change the entire structure so that it worked."

It didn't happen for Downey and Ringwald that time, but later they starred together in "The Pick-up Artist" (1987).

"Pretty in Pink," rated PG-13, runs 1 hour and 36 minutes. It received 73% on the Tomatometer with an 81% audience score and a 6.8/10 on IMDb.

Kicking off its own romance trilogy, "Bridget Jones's Diary" (2001) hit cinemas the same year as "Serendipity." Sometimes romance films come in double doses.

This one is about a love triangle between the title character Bridget Jones (Renée Zellweger), Daniel Cleaver (Hugh Grant) and Mark Darcy (Colin Firth). Rather than a series of coincidences, this film is filled with a series of misunderstandings and awkward situations for the characters. It's based on the 1996 novel by Helen Fielding; she also received a writing credit on the film.

Bridget comes across as a character who just really hasn't gotten her life together. She's clumsy and prone to circumstantial accidents or mistakes. Unwisely, she flirts with her boss and gets herself into a pickle at work. Her diary focuses on all of her romantic interests and interactions.

Before long, she's in the middle of two men vying for her affection. Who shall she choose? Even if you stick around until the end of the film, you're still going to need to watch two more to find out who she eventually chooses: "Bridget Jones: Edge of Reason" (2004) and "Bridget Jones's Baby" (2016).

"Bridget Jones's Diary," rated R, runs 1 hour and 32 minutes. It received 79% on the Tomatometer with an 81% audience score and a 6.7/10 on IMDb.

Speaking of a double dose of romance films, we have two new ones hitting cinemas this month—just in time for Valentine's Day.

The first is a romantic comedy called "Marry Me" starring singer/actor Jennifer Lopez (Kat Valdez) and Owen Wilson (Charlie Gilbert). I love the premise of this film, after watching the trailer. A single dad (Gilbert) gets convinced by his daughter and a friend to go to a concert for major pop star (Valdez) where she and her fiancé, who's also a big entertainer, plan to tie the knot live on stage.

Moments before the live wedding would take place, Valdez finds out her fiancé cheated on her and she takes the stage alone in her wedding dress—her heart full of anguish. Rather than admit defeat, she decides to try something different. In the crowd with his daughter, Gilbert gets handed a sign with the words to Valdez's song, "Marry Me" on it. Looking through the crowd, she sees the man carrying the sign and in a moment of desperation and heartbreak she decides, "Why not?" and she marries this stranger from the crowd.

The movie looks like it will be original and cute—an exploration of love for two people from two different worlds—a great date film just in time for the date capital holiday of the year. If my "girlfriend" would respond to my recent texts, maybe I would ask her to go see it with me. If not, I may have to go see this one by myself.

Directed by Kat Coiro, "Marry Me," rated PG-13, runs 1 hour and 52 minutes. It releases Feb. 11 at cinemas and streaming on Peacock. No Rotten Tomatoes or IMDb scores are yet available.

Another big romance film this February will be the newest telling of "Cyrano" featuring the massive talent of none other than Peter Dinklage of "Game of Thrones" fame in the title role.

The trailers show this film as a swashbuckling historical romance filled with plenty of sword fights. Rather than portray the central viewpoint character as someone with a facial disfigurement, such as a long nose for Steve Martin in the romantic comedy "Roxanne" (1987), Cyrano de Bergerac is a person of small stature yet is bigger than life itself. He's a master swordsman, a poet, a leader and more yet he cannot bring himself to reveal his feelings to the woman he loves.

This is a relatable film for many. Even without some type of facial disfigurement as Cyrano originally suffered from, some of us can't manage the courage to tell another person how we truly feel. Perhaps it's the fear of rejection or it's that we want to hang onto the dream a little longer, unsure of the outcome. Choices. Sometimes, we choose to do nothing when we should do something positive. Regardless, I plan to catch this one in cinemas—I've already read several rave reviews of Dinklage's top-tier performance.

"Cyrano," rated PG-13, releases Feb. 25 in cinemas. The film is directed by Joe Wright and features Dinklage, Haley Bennet (Roxanne), Kelvin Harrison Jr. (Christian) and Ben Mendelsohn (De Guiche). This one already received an 85% Tomatometer score from 66 reviews and a 6.0/10 on IMDb.

"The show must go on."