

THE GOODBYE GIRL

Directed by Herbert Ross
Produced by Ray Stark
Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
Released in 1977

Don't forget about this movie. A true confection of comedy, *The Goodbye Girl* provided Richard Dreyfuss his only Oscar and proves that Neil Simon really was, for a time, America's best playwright.

A New York single mom, when ditched by a selfish actor, must acquiesce in the presence of a sub-lessee of said selfish actor. The mom is a burnt-out musical dancer, the daughter a prodigious conversationalist, the sub-lessee a Chicago actor making his Off-Off Broadway debut as Richard III...with a twist.

Neil Simon combines romance with his Odd Couple formula of strange bedfellows. It's a brilliant idea because opposites do attract (or at least men and women who fight are often attracted to each other). Moreover, *The Odd Couple* wears out its welcome through over-repetition, but here the romantic element takes over just as we've had enough of their sparring. And since the setup is that the mom has been ditched by two previous actors, she's wary of this one and isn't sure she can be that trusting again.

In most love stories the tension is gone once the leads have sex, but here there's still no resolution because the movie was never about whether they would get together, but whether they would stay together. This yields drama to the last drop.

The end is a brilliant compromise; they're not together but they are. The actor (Dreyfuss) will return to the dancer (Marsha Mason) once he's finished shooting a movie, and the guitar that has been with him from the beginning of the story will stay with the dancer as collateral and serve as a Dreyfuss stand-in.

From the Feminist perspective, it's amusing to speculate as to whether Paula would have slept with Elliot that night of the rooftop interlude if he had not told her, during their dancing, that he got a "real job." Was it the prospect of security that summoned her sex drive, or is it just a coincidence? After all, she does spend the rest of the movie redecorating her apartment on Elliot's improv troupe salary. And it fits her character, too—she's been dumped on so much that she cares about security and love (assuming they can be disassociated) in equal parts.

And she's thinking about her daughter, too. As realized by Quinn Cummings, the indefatigably precocious Lucy is the movie's secret weapon. She provides wry commentary and she magnifies for the audience the pain of Paula's estrangement. Her best scene is the carriage ride with Elliot. He accepts the responsibility that the previous guys didn't—he's a surrogate father to Lucy. She, like her mother, loves him but is afraid to commit.

Lucy is a gem, but why the filmmakers would consider it endearing or humorous to have Lucy spout sundry obscenities is a mystery. In the late '70s cursing children must have seemed radically chic. Now it's just disconcertingly counter-intuitive and common.

AN ILLUMINED ILLUSIONS ESSAY BY IAN C. BLOOM

This is about as fun as a movie can get and serves as a testament to Richard Dreyfuss's wasted potential. Some romantic comedies have setups as good as this one, but very few are quite as funny.