

The many themes of love are explored in this wonderful ensemble romance.

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Have you noticed how uninteresting, or just plain bad, film titles are getting? We all know that a poor title will not entice us to see a film. But it also means that a film, if it's a good one, has an added burden to capture our attention if we do go see it. Fortunately, "The Feast of Love" overcomes its title.

Set in current day Portland, Ore., the film, based on Charles Baxter's critically acclaimed novel, is built around a theme rather than a storyline: the many incarnations of love that are going on around us every day and the people who are experiencing them. But don't get the wrong impression: theme-centered the film may be, but there's more than enough story to satisfy the hungriest plot addict.

Told in a voiceover by one of the main characters, a wise, observant and seemingly detached professor named Harry Stevenson -- played with his usual quiet dignity by the redoubtable Morgan Freeman -- the film follows one couple after another as they go through the various stages of falling in love, denying love, encountering the problems of love, and falling out of love. The couples also represent the different generations. There's the high-school, twenty-something generation [Oscar and Chloe], the thirty-something generation [Bradley and Kathryn, Kathryn and Mary, Bradley and Diana, and Diana and David], and the fifty- and sixty-something generation [Harry and Esther].

Quiet, observant Harry, who has a story of his own, is contrasted with his friend Bradley [Greg Kinnear, last seen as the dad in "Little Miss Sunshine"]. Bradley, a hopeless romantic, is open, innocent, and, alas, clueless, oblivious to the tell-tale nuances in the behavior of those around him, as he continually falls in and out of love.

From this brief description, the film sounds like a whirligig of passion. But although there is nudity and simulated sex at various points in it, the film is not a titillating sexploitation. It is a presentation of the different kinds of love relationships we observe on a daily basis -- and in many cases have experienced or are experiencing ourselves.

Many critics will call the film shallow, and accuse it of teetering on the edge of soap opera, and admittedly some of the scenes are unconvincing and awkward. But the film's strength is how it involves us in the lives of the characters. They are so much like our neighbors and friends and in many cases like ourselves that we become totally immersed in their predicaments.

In the end, "The Feast of Love" is an examination of our current romantic social mores and makes for the kind of popular film we see all too seldom these days --one that entertains but forces us to contemplate our lives; one that allows us to see the issues that engage us daily played out before our eyes and, most important, shows them shaped and shown in a perspective that calls for our reflection.

It is not surprising that the film was directed by Robert Benton, who has written or directed such socially significant films as "Bonnie and Clyde," "Kramer vs. Kramer," "Places In The Heart," and "The Human Stain."

The film's name may not be appealing, but it's content is.

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