



Waitress

Humbler Pies

By Josef Woodard

Thursday, May 24, 2007

Waitress. Keri Russell, Cheryl Hines, Nathan Fillian, Jeremy Sisto, Andy Griffith, and Adrienne Shelly star in a film written and directed by Shelly.

The feel-good movie theory is fairly standard operating procedure in Hollywood, in which clichés and cookie-cutter sentimentality are clinically proven to push emotional buttons in paying customers. But it doesn't have to be a dirty word. This year's brightest case in point: writer/director Adrienne Shelly's irresistible *Waitress*, a sparkling, smart, and, in its own way, *feel-good* modern fairytale about female empowerment.

We feel good in the presence of actress Keri Russell, whose blend of vulnerability and self-reliance is pitch perfect in the role of Jenna, a pregnant Southern waitress struggling to find money and the will to leave her abusive lug of a husband. The film's sparkling colors and careful compositional eye are pleasant, too. The visual style mixes with the narrative's bittersweet airs and droll comedy to give the tale a distinctive flair — not

quite art film, but definitely left of Hollywood. In short, all the dramatic, comic, and offbeat ingredients come together in an inspired balance, like, say, a delicious but innovative pie.

Tragically, the film also represents the closing of the book on writer/director Adrienne Shelly, who was murdered while in the finishing stages of the film. She was an admired actress in the margins who often worked with director Hal Hartley, and some of Hartley's indie-minded quirkiness and core humanity seeps into this project.

All things considered, *Waitress* is a comedy with a serious underpinning that emerges in clever ways. Jenna's dream of opening her own pie shop becomes a private cache of idealism to counteract the grit of her shabby marriage. She has an affair with her doctor, but stops short of using him as a male rescuer: "I don't need saving," she insists. From the cutaway segments with Jenna creating exotic pies (which look scrumptious) to an interior monologue in which she reads a letter to her unborn baby, a feeling of emptiness and a nagging desire for escape and self-discovery emerge in unexpected ways.

Even though we recognize the hints of formula and the manipulation beneath the bright, eccentric surfaces of *Waitress*, we ultimately yield to its many seductions. But it hurts our hearts to know that a gifted director's voice — one from outside the boy's club, no less — has been cruelly stilled.