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arts

FILM: Still Hungry

BY SCOTT SHERMAN

Eating Out
Ariztical Entertainment,
2004, 90 minutes

Because I support gay cinema and love romantic comedies that feature cute, often shirtless boys kissing each other, I wish I could give Q Allan Brocka's *Eating Out* an unqualified rave. Unfortunately, the movie is an unevenly scripted, listlessly edited affair that repels and confounds as often as it charms. For example, the film opens with an ugly heterosexual "rape." It turns out to be consensual role-playing, but still, what were they thinking?

Scott Lunsford plays Caleb, a hunky straight man unable to find love in the big city. His nerdy gay roommate, Kyle, played by Jim Verraros, is secretly in lust with him. Because the script needs to complicate things as much as possible, Kyle also wants his best friend's roommate Marc (*Desperate Housewives*' Ryan Carnes). Marc, of course, has a crush on Caleb. Lastly, Marc's roommate, Gwen (Emily Stiles), who always falls for gay guys, used to be in love with Marc but now finds herself drawn to Caleb, who at Kyle's behest is pretending to be gay and dates Marc only because he wants to get Gwen's attention.

Confused? This is the kind of movie that makes sense only if you both suspend reality and are drunk. Everyone acts as stupidly and badly as possible. For example, while Gwen is supposed to be the likable heroine of the story, she has no problem sleeping with her best friend's date. Caleb pretends he is gay even though he knows Gwen is tired of being involved with gay guys. Kyle encourages Caleb to date Marc because that will bring Marc over to his apartment, as if throwing one's more attractive friends at a man will lead to his heart.

While mix-ups and hidden agendas are central to many romantic comedies, they work only if they are psychologically true to the characters. Here, the characters are beyond lovably nutty — they're



bizarre and unbelievable.

Try this: In the film's set piece, Marc brings Caleb to his apartment after their first date. Caleb, who is just playing gay, tries to avoid physical contact. When Gwen calls Marc to ask how the date went, she somehow ends up on the phone with Caleb. She initiates a phone sex session with him and convinces him to let Marc go down on him while she masturbates.

Now, this scene is titillating but does it seem like anything real people would do? Gwen has phone sex with Caleb while he's on a date with Marc? Caleb plays along while Marc watches? Caleb gets so carried away by Gwen that he lets a man blow him for the first time? Marc thinks this is normal for a first date? Hello!

The performances are mixed. The men who play Caleb and Marc are pretty, but their performances are lethargic. Caleb (Lunsford) is supposed to be a loveable dumb hunk, but he seems detached and a little sleepy. Ryan Carnes as Marc is given very little in the script on which to build a character. He doesn't add much.

More interesting are the other leads. As Gwen, Emily Stiles plays a character who not only makes no sense but is often deceitful and unkind. Still, her considerable natural appeal and spirited line-readings keeps Gwen likable and interesting to watch. Especially when playing against the limp Lunsford and

Carnes, she seems juicily full of life.

Also great is cute Jim Verraros, who was a very early reject in the first season of *American Idol*. Openly gay Verraros is funny and likable as Kyle, bringing a quirky charisma to his poorly-drawn character. Although he over-mugs a little (think Paul Lynde as the Center Square) he is the standout in this cast. Despite the presence of some prettier boys, you can't take your eyes off him in any scene he's in.

The script, while frustratingly unbelievable, has some funny lines. "All I do is help gay guys come out," Gwen moans, "I feel like a turnstile to the White Party."

Kyle, commenting on the fact that he tricks even though he can't find Mr. Right, says "guys around here are like day old doughnuts. I eat them because they're around."

Despite the film's faults, if you're a romantic sucker like I am, you'll find yourself smiling at the end when all the unlikely lovers find themselves appropriately paired off. If you can look past the silly story and the tasteless excesses, you'll find some entertaining performances and funny one-liners. With livelier direction and some editing, you'd have found them more easily. ▼

Scott Sherman lives in Richmond and hosts the *Gay Parenting Podcast* at www.gayparenting.thepodcastnetwork.com.

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