

Film Review

Love and Freedom in the Tangled Web

"Kiss of the Spider Woman" directed by Hector Babenco

Convicted child molester and aging queen, Luis (William Hurt) has been summoned to the warden's office on the pretext of a visit from his mother. The warden wants to make a deal: in exchange for any information Luis can give the authorities on his cellmate Valentin (Raul Julia), a political prisoner, Luis will be granted an early parole on his eight-year sentence. Before he leaves the office, Luis mentions that Valentin already knows that Luis' mother always brings him groceries on her visits and may become suspicious if he returns with nothing. The warden obligingly loads Luis up with delicacies he names. Luis then proceeds to use the unexpected food to nurse Valentin back to health from a bout with poison-induced sickness.

This scene captures in miniature the conflict between the animal drive for self-preservation and the human instinct for kindness and generosity which lies at the heart of this powerful film by the Argentine director Hector Babenco. Luis is concerned only with love, and Valentin only with political liberty, but both have seen their ideals vanish like mirages in the spiritual desert of an authoritarian state. Now, confined together in a squalid Souther American prison, they pass their time with illusions. Luis recounts the plots of old "romantic" films, and Valentin fantasizes about the day when "the movement" will finally be victorious.

Luis' favorite romantic fantasy turns

out to be a Nazi propoganda film-cum-melodrama. Valentin is suitably offended as the nature of the film becomes clear to him, but he cannot help becoming entranced by the twists and turns of the plot as the "love" story unfolds. We, too, are shown clips of this film within a film (made highly amusing by Sonia Braga's splendid over-performance as the doomed French chanteuse). What the sub-film provides is an ironic counterpoint to real life in the prison cell, where love and politics cannot help becoming substantial issues of very real importance.

Based on a novel of the same name by the Argentine novelist Manuel Puig, this is a film with some very serious things to say on both subjects. That it manages to do so without slipping into a self-righteous tone is a credit both to the director and to Hurt and Julia, both of whom juggle their roles as "real people" and as the masks and voices for larger concerns with great skill. Hurt was named Best Actor at Cannes for his performance here, and anyone who saw Julia in his role as the police inspector in the recently released "Compromising Positions" will be hard pressed to hold that against him for long.

Depending on your point of view, you may find the compassion these two men show each other in the face of casual brutality either ultimately real or the ultimate in illusion. The film itself is not non-committal on this score, and the position taken is convincingly defended. In either case, it is a film well worth seeing -- and thinking about it afterwards can prove equally rewarding.

-Richard Corcoran

When You Meet a Lesbian: Hints for the Heterosexual Woman

1. Do not run screaming from the room. This is rude.
2. If you must back away, do so slowly and with discretion.
3. Do not assume she is attracted to you.
4. Do not assume she is not attracted to you.
5. Do not assume you are not attracted to her.
6. Do not expect her to be as excited about meeting a heterosexual as you may be about meeting a lesbian. She was probably raised with them.
7. Do not immediately start talking about your boyfriend or husband in order to make it clear that you are straight. She probably already knows.
8. Do not tell her that it is sexist to prefer women, that people are people, and that she should be able to love everybody. Do not tell her that men are as oppressed by sexism as women and that women should help men fight their oppression. These are common fallacies and should be understood as such.
9. Do not invite her someplace where there will be men unless you tell her in advance. She may not want to be with them.
10. Do not ask her how she got this way. Instead ask yourself how you got that way.
11. Do not assume that she is dying to talk about being a lesbian.
12. Do not expect her to refrain from talking about being a lesbian.
13. Do not trivialize her experience by assuming it is a bedroom issue only. She is a lesbian 24 hours a day.
14. Do not assume that because she's a lesbian, she wants to be treated like a man.
15. Do not assume that her heart will leap with joy if you touch her arm (condescendingly? flirtatiously? power testing?) It makes her angry.
16. If you are tempted to tell her she's taking the easy way out, THINK ABOUT THAT.