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On-screen romance, off-screen lessons

Romantic comedies are written to make you laugh, but there's truth in some of those jokes

By Wendy Donahue, Tribune Newspapers

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Love them or hate them, romantic comedies cannot be ignored this Valentine's Day.

Adam Sandler and Jennifer Aniston in the coverup caper "Just Go With It." Natalie Portman as a commitment-phobe in "No Strings Attached." Riches-to-rags-to-romance in "From Prada to Nada." Vince Vaughn facing "The Dilemma" after witnessing infidelity. Paul Giamatti aiming for romantic redemption in "Barney's Version." And if those don't cover all the bases, "Gnomeo & Juliet" animates the genre.

"Romantic comedies are very big," said Elayne Rapping, professor of American studies specializing in popular culture at the State University of New York at Buffalo. "Right now, we're in the mood for a much more idealized view of everything, but certainly, especially, romantic and sexual relationships. These movies become popular in times when there's a lot of social disruption."

Never mind that romance causes its fair share of it, as the divorce rate and anyone over age 13 can attest. Hollywood's depictions often are crass and cliched. But once in a while, these movies offer a realistic lesson along with a laugh, if only in the form of a cautionary tale about who, when and why not to love.

"The overwhelming majority in the romantic comedy genre are escapist female fantasies, hence the 'chick flick' designation," said Barbara Hayes, licensed marriage and family therapist and author of "Beware of Dogs: How to Avoid Dating Disasters" (iUniverse.com, \$22.95). "The signature plotline is boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy has epiphany, boy wins girl back. These movies want us to believe that the love of a good woman will always change a guy from a jerk into a sweet, sensitive partner and true love always wins out."

Bree Maresca-Kramer, counselor and author of "It's That Simple!" relationship books — one for men and one for women — said that few romantic comedies start out with two "whole" people. That perpetuates what is wrong with many relationships today.

"Many are based on two broken halves meeting to make a whole," Maresca-Kramer said, "which never

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works."

Romantic comedies often are most instructive when there's a touch of darkness or irony.

"The most realistic modern-day movie I can think of is 'The Break-Up,'" Maresca-Kramer said, "primarily because it depicts a more accurate view of the unraveling and deconstruction of a once-solid and loving relationship."

That doesn't mean Maresca-Kramer has a fatalist view of relationships — just the ones in which each partner is "consumed by being right."

"The lesson 'The Break-Up' audience is privy to is that they can save their relationship if they each do what is necessary, which is having the willingness, doing the work and applying the proper tools to make it work," Maresca-Kramer said.

Hayes said the 2000 movie "High Fidelity," starring John Cusack, remains one of her favorite exceptions to the get-fixed-quick myth.

"In so many films the guy is either incredibly wonderful — every Tom Hanks character — or pretty much a jerk until the 'aha moment,'" Hayes said. "The John Cusack character is multidimensional, a regular guy with run-of-the-mill issues that end up destroying his relationship. He goes through a journey of introspection and self-analysis in order to win his girlfriend back. It doesn't all come to him in a blinding flash."

But if it's a flash you want, you can get it, much more graphically than in the past.

"It used to be they just kissed and she put her leg up and then you knew they did it," Rapping said. "In movies today, they're getting into much more detail about people's sexual relationships."

In a more significant score for realism, the partnerships aren't always traditional and tidy.

"The best romantic comedy I've seen is 'The Kids Are All Right,'" said Rapping, citing the recent film about a family headed by a lesbian couple, including Annette Bening, who has been nominated for an Academy Award for her performance. "I think that was a real portrayal in a comic way of a serious relationship and what really happens and how people really do resolve their problems."

Hint: Comic relief truly does help, in real-life relationships too.

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Lessons among the laughs

Lessons from romantic comedies sometimes come from subplots, secondary characters and, occasionally, even happily-ever-afters. Here are some favorites of relationship experts.

"Greenberg" (2010): While housesitting for his brother, the troubled Roger (Ben Stiller) strikes up a relationship with his brother's assistant (Greta Gerwig).

Lesson: "In it is one of my favorite lines, 'Hurt people hurt people,'" said relationship counselor Mary Jo Rapini. "It isn't true we attract what we need. More likely we attract what we are giving out. If you are feeling down, vulnerable and sad, don't date. Better to wait until you are feeling at your best if you want

to attract someone who is at their best."

"It's Complicated" (2009): Jane (Meryl Streep) has an affair with her ex-husband (Alec Baldwin), who has remarried.

Lesson: "Today, reuniting ... with an ex-partner isn't the only way to have a happy ending," said marriage therapist Barbara Hayes. "A woman can realize that she has grown beyond the confines of her old role and is happier in her single life."

"Julie & Julia" (2009): Half the movie documents the relationship between legendary cookbook author Julia Child, played by Meryl Streep, and her husband, Paul (Stanley Tucci).

Lesson: "Laughing together is as important as supporting one another through the darker times," said Andrea Reiser, co-author with husband David Reiser of "Letters From Home: A Wake-Up Call for Success & Wealth" (Wiley, \$27.95). "Julia and Paul Child championed each other, raised each other to their highest potential and were willing to sacrifice for the other's opportunity. And the whipped cream on the souffle? A little afternoon delight (wink!)."

"Love Actually" (2003): The love lives of eight couples include office romance.

Lesson: "The lessons that singletons can derive are moral," said Marla Martenson, author of "Diary of a Beverly Hills Matchmaker" (Bettie Youngs Books, \$14.95). "It is often exciting to have a crush on a colleague at work, and even though you know that he or she is married, the two lives — work and home — somehow seem separate, and you may figure, 'Hey, this is exciting. It's not my problem if he's married; she'll never find out.' But the damage that you are doing to someone's marriage and your own self-worth is serious and packs a punch in the karma department as well."

"The Hangover" (2009): A Las Vegas bachelor party runs amok.

Lesson: "If you're a bride anxious that the bachelor party will keep your groom from the altar, plan your wedding for at least two weeks after his event," said Charley Moore, attorney and founder of the online legal service Rocket Lawyer. "Even then, consider buying wedding insurance to cover the costs of the ceremony and reception."

— W.D.

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