

# Women's issues

## Meg Ryan, muddled messages make for awkward update of classic camp comedy

Last Updated: Thursday, September 11, 2008 | 3:00 PM ET [Comments 13](#) [Recommend 16](#)

By Katrina Onstad, [CBC News](#)



Mary Haines

*(Meg Ryan) is a cheerful and content wife who discovers her husband is having an affair in Diane English's remake of the 1939 George Cukor classic *The Women*. (Claudette Barius/Alliance Films)*

On her [blog](#), a former aspiring screenwriter named [Jennifer Kesler](#) recently noted a phenomenon that she calls the “Bechdel test” (after comic book artist [Alison Bechdel](#), who wrote a [strip](#) about the test). As a young writer in Hollywood, Kesler was often told – directly and indirectly – that no studio interested in profits (i.e. all of them) wants to shoot a script in which: 1) there are at least two named female characters who 2) talk to each other about 3) something other than a man. If a script hits all three points simultaneously, it will be deemed box-office death and never get made into a movie. This helps explain the infinitesimal number of women in movies these days. Only three of last year’s top 20 films were vehicles for women, and none featured women over 40, according to [The New York Times](#).

Kesler suggests that the female void on screen isn’t solely because few women infiltrate the directing and production ranks – though that’s no small factor — but is due to something deeply cultural, an unspoken misogyny passing itself off as good business. Kesler kept coming up against brick walls while trying to launch her non-rom-com, female-centred scripts. After being told over and over to replace her female leads with men, an executive finally laid it out for her: “The audience doesn’t want to listen to a bunch of women talking about whatever it is women talk about.”

**These aren’t the fanged, upper-crust wives that Joan Crawford, as the 1940s perfume girl, contended with in Cukor’s *Women*. They have been softened, Oprah-ized to send a feel-good message about self-improvement.**

Into this fray wanders *The Women*, a remake of the 1939 [George Cukor camp comedy](#) (based on the Clare Boothe Luce play) that doesn’t exactly upend the Bechdel test. Yes, the characters have names, and they talk to each other, but – good old number 3 – what they mostly talk about is men. That singular focus is something

of a gymnastic feat, as nary a man appears in the film.

It took writer-director [Diane English 14 years](#) to get *The Women* remade, which is shocking considering she was the creator of the now-iconic '80s television series [Murphy Brown](#). The success of that series is, in retrospect, a big kiss-off to the Bechdel test. (Then again, television is always ahead of the game.) *Murphy Brown* was built around a curmudgeonly successful female character who talked about work, life and politics and eventually embarked upon – accidentally and controversially – single motherhood.

*Murphy Brown* was hugely successful two decades ago, but somehow, it feels like a more complex, respectful depiction of women – or at least one woman — than what's offered in popular culture today. In *The Women*, English's Murphy-esque, second wave equality feminism collides with the lighter, more materialistic version of womanhood that's risen in the age of [Shopaholic](#) and *Sex and the City*. (Though I stand by my [argument](#) that *Sex and the City* isn't merely shorthand for “trivial,” because the pursuit of love is no small idea. A few poets agree.) This feminist mash-up in *The Women* is weird enough, but it sits atop a film that's awkward and earnest, and only sporadically funny.



*Crystal Allen (Eva Mendes) is a perfume counter girl who preys on Haines's husband in The Women. (Claudette Barius/Alliance Films)*

*The Women* creaks under the exertion required to update the story of the well-heeled New York friends of virtuous Mary Haines (Meg Ryan), a Long Island society wife with a blank look of dissatisfaction (or maybe it's all that plastic [surgery](#)). Annette Bening takes on the [Rosalind Russell](#) role of Sylvia Fowler, now de-bitched into a strident magazine editor with a heart of gold. Still, it's good casting. Bening could be a modern-day Rosalind Russell; they share a bemused busy-ness, one eyebrow cocked.

When Mary discovers her husband is having an affair with a Saks Fifth Avenue “perfume girl” (one of many risible anachronisms), her friends circle the wagons. Debra Messing is a perpetually pregnant earth mama and there's a sassy lesbian writer who *might* have been played by [Jada Pinkett Smith](#) — I can't confirm Smith's presence, fleeting as it was, but I have an eerie feeling she was in the film, the way you sometimes sense someone has just been in a room before you got there, even though there's no real evidence of anything moved or touched. Smith seems to exist solely to corral all the women into a restaurant without encountering a single *male* extra (gay character = gay bar).

These aren't the fanged, upper-crust wives that Joan Crawford, as the 1940s perfume girl, contended with in Cukor's *Women*. They have been softened, Oprah-ized to send a feel-good message about self-improvement. Mary begins to pull herself out of the breakup hole by getting her hair flat-ironed and returning to her true love, fashion design.

What happened to Meg Ryan? Perhaps trying to distance herself from the crinkly grinned appeal that made her a star, she's become such a morose figure on screen, withholding and joyless. Even when Mary is supposed to be fully transformed into a swan, Ryan looks miserable (Jennifer Aniston suffers the same Former Comedienne's Curse). Bening, in contrast, tries her best to own the slight script. Sylvia heads up a fashion magazine, but if she doesn't dumb down the product, she'll be hoofed. English's sitcom background doesn't allow for much nuance, but these kinds of compromises are universal workplace heartbreaks; Bening brims with the vital anger of an aging woman becoming obsolete.



*From left, Sylvie Fowler (Annette Bening), Alex Fisher (Jada Pinkett Smith) and Edie Cohen (Debra Messing) circle the wagons when their friend's husband is unfaithful. (Claudette Barius/Alliance Films)*

Spanning the age spectrum of female experience, Mary's young daughter (India Ennenga) struggles with body issues. (The film is filled with Dove soap product placement — the [preferred cleanser of those sensitive to female oppression](#).) When Mary's mother, played with great timing by [Candice Bergen](#), gives in and has a facelift, she notes, in one of the film's better lines, "I looked around and there were no 60-year-old women left."

But the mixed messages are exhausting. When Ryan's makeover becomes the key to her salvation, it's unclear exactly what English wants to say. Be yourself – but with better hair and makeup?

So what, then, would a movie about women's lives really look like? Would the women be this wealthy, this superficial, this unlined? Maybe, but they would need to be funny, or moving, or fascinating, too. In the end, the problem isn't more movies with women or fewer movies with women, but more *good* movies. And yes, the women in them (because how can a movie about the human condition be any good if there are no women in it?) should have names and talk about "whatever it is women talk about." What that is, by the way, is everything.

*The Women opens Sept. 19.*

*Katrina Onstad is the film columnist for CBC.ca.*

- [Post a comment](#)  
*13* Comments have been posted
- [Recommend this story](#)  
*16* People have recommended this story

**Story comments (13)**

Sort: [Most recent](#) | [First to last](#) | [Most recommended](#)

**[TMarie](#) wrote:**Posted 2008/09/17

at 11:50 AM ETto Hedgehog who wrote:

Meg Ryan looks absolutely amazing. And really, so what if she's had some work done. You got the money and it makes you feel good why not. Why do you care?

She doesnt look absolutely amazing , that pic up there is airbrushed to death, she now looks odd and unlike her former self. Sure.. do what makes you feel good if you can afford it but if people think youve changed yourself so much that you no longer resemble the 'you' that got you where you are, then dont be surprised if youre no longer drawing in the masses to see your movies. Her cosmetic surgery is on many sites online that feature other strange face lifts including Kenny Rogers and Michael Jackson. I just find it sad that people feel the need to alter themselves so much so that they no longer look anything like they did. Theyre not taking off years so much as they are completely changing what they once had...and what they once had was what got them where they are.

[2Peoplerecommendedthis comment](#) [2Recommend this comment](#) [Report abuse](#)

**[hapa604](#) wrote:**Posted 2008/09/15

at 4:06 PM ETJayJay - key words "last year"

[1Personrecommendedthis comment](#) [1Recommend this comment](#) [Report abuse](#)

**[Hedge hog](#) wrote:**Posted 2008/09/15

at 3:21 PM ETMeg Ryan looks absolutely amazing. And really, so what if she's had some work done. You got the money and it makes you feel good why not. Why do you care?

[3Peoplerecommendedthis comment](#) [3Recommend this comment](#) [Report abuse](#)

**[Dorism54](#) wrote:**Posted 2008/09/15

at 2:39 PM ETI was so disappointed in this movie -- the same stereotypical roles played by the same stereotypical actors. Mixed messages - YES! And how many women do you know who just need a makeover to get their pre-teen to fall back into line. This movie was just a bunch of crap - a waste of my \$9.

[4Peoplerecommendedthis comment](#) [4Recommend this comment](#) [Report abuse](#)

**[grovercarey](#) wrote:**Posted 2008/09/15

at 12:07 AM ETExcellent investigative work, JayJay:

Can you name the other two?

Sorry, but I just couldn't resist being a little contrary. :)

Grover

[1Personrecommendedthis comment](#) [1Recommend this comment](#) [Report abuse](#)

- [Previous](#)
- [1](#)
- [2](#)
- [3](#)
- [Next](#)

### Post your comment

Note: The CBC does not necessarily endorse any of the views posted. By submitting your comments, you acknowledge that CBC has the right to reproduce, broadcast and publicize those comments or any part thereof in any manner whatsoever. Please note that comments are pre-moderated/reviewed and published according to our [submission guidelines](#).

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Log in](#) | [Sign up](#)

Comment:

Post

[Submission policy](#)