



DYING YOUNG

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Abstract:

Julia Roberts stars as a young working-class woman, Hilary O'Neil, who is hired as nurse-cook-companion to a wealthy, terminally ill young man, Victor Geddes (Campbell Scott). Victor wants an attractive woman to help him during his painful chemotherapy treatments, and the two ultimately fall in love.

Summary:

When Twentieth Century-Fox's *DYING YOUNG* opened in June, 1991, most Hollywood insiders predicted a huge opening weekend at the box office for the romantic drama. After all, the film boasted a lead performance from actress Julia Roberts, who, at the time, was fast becoming America's premier female entertainer. In 1990, Roberts, playing a sweet hooker, helped Garry Marshall's *PRETTY WOMAN* become that year's third-highest-grossing film. Roberts' subsequent effort, Joseph Ruben's *SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY* (1991), despite overwhelmingly negative reviews, opened with a \$13.78 million weekend gross. All signs looked positive for another great success for Roberts. After four weeks of release during the year's busiest season, however, *DYING YOUNG* grossed a sad \$26 million and was fast becoming one of the summer's biggest box-office failures. If *DYING YOUNG*'s disappointing performance proves anything, it is the fact that even the considerable charm of Roberts cannot save an insipid, unappealing soap bubble of a film.

Based on Marti Leimbach's critically respected 1990 novel of the same name, the film *DYING YOUNG* was designed from the beginning to be a vehicle for Roberts. Producer/actress Sally Field had been so impressed with her costar in Herbert Ross's *STEEL MAGNOLIAS* (1989) that, when she bought the rights to the Leimbach novel, she immediately envisioned Roberts as the book's leading character. While the novel described its heroine, Hilary O'Neil, as an intelligent, young WASP with the desire to become a veterinarian, Field and fellow producer Kevin McCormick's

vision was to make the Hilary character a working-class girl with little ambition save the dream of becoming someone different. In other words, Field and McCormick, with the help of screenwriter Richard Friedenber, were eager to stamp the Cinderella story onto the basic structure of Leimbach's narrative.

Because it appeals to the mass audience, representing the fantasy of many female filmgoers of marrying rich and being forever happy, the Cinderella story has become an essential part in the blueprint for the archetypal Julia Roberts film. This framework, snatched from the Pygmalion myth, usually calls for a poor-but-pretty young woman who is given the chance to reinvent her life with the guidance of an often-older-but-always-wealthier man. This patron of the gentler sex gives the helpless girl what is missing in her life, forms her into something new, then promptly falls madly in love with her.

PRETTY WOMAN, in which Roberts plays a prostitute who says quite seriously, "I want the fairy tale," is certainly the epitome of this tired formula. In one of Roberts' early films, Donald Petrie's MYSTIC PIZZA (1988), the actress plays a working-class Connecticut waitress whose summertime relationship with a rich young preppy on vacation teaches her some of life's big lessons. In an interesting twist on the formula, SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY begins with the Roberts character having already discarded her meager past and become locked into a marriage with an abusive businessman. Here again, however, Roberts is given the chance to reinvent herself by throwing away her rich husband and starting a modest new life with little money in a country town. Only a couple of days pass, however, before she meets another man, a university professor with a big empty house, who shows her how happy life can be.

Staying true to the Cinderella structure, the film version of DYING YOUNG strips Leimbach's heroine of her goals of pursuing animal medicine, plucks her out of her Boston home, and drops her into the blue-collar environment of downtown Oakland. After she finds her boyfriend in bed with another woman, Hilary moves back home with her mother (Ellen Burstyn), who collects dolls, watches the Home Shopping Club, and bemoans what a flop Hilary has turned out to be. Answering an ad which offers room and board for nursing work, Hilary is interrogated by wealthy patrician Richard Geddes (David Selby), whose snobbish reaction to her short skirt, high heels, and bawdy behavior leads her to storm off in disgust. Geddes' son, Victor (Campbell Scott), suffering from leukemia, spots Hilary before she leaves and dispatches butler Malachi (George Martin) to retrieve her. Victor, despite his father's advice to the contrary, gives Hilary the job. After a night of Victor vomiting because of chemotherapy, the poor girl, depressed over the pathetic life of cancer victims, quickly plans to quit.

Recognizing that her own sorry existence is one big dead end, Hilary reverses her decision and devotes her life to helping Victor. She quits smoking, stops dressing in tight, trashy clothes, and takes a liking to macrobiotic cooking. Victor begins to teach Hilary not only about German expressionism, the subject of his dissertation, but also how to act with class. Once his bout with chemotherapy is over, Victor, now in remission, suggests that the two of them rent a house in

Northern California without telling Victor's domineering father. Once ensconced in their new cliffside manor, Victor and Hilary fall in love. Between sessions of making love, Hilary and Victor start friendships with Gordon (Vincent D'Onofrio), the handyman, and Estelle (Colleen Dewhurst, Campbell Scott's real-life mother), a wise old widow who reads tea leaves and gives advice.

On Christmas Eve, Victor and Hilary entertain Gordon, but the evening goes awry when Victor becomes verbally abusive. Hilary is shocked and, after discovering a used hypodermic needle, searches for and finds Victor's plentiful morphine supply. She confronts Victor, who admits that his chemotherapy was never completed. All he wanted to do was get away from his father and die in the arms of the woman he loves. Hilary is devastated; she curses Victor's selfishness and leaves him. Her first stop is a phone booth, where she calls Victor's father and tells him where he can find his dying son.

Before his father can take Victor back to San Francisco, Estelle hosts a holiday ball, where, in true soap-opera fashion, all the characters mingle and the plot is resolved. Estelle tells Hilary to fight for the man she loves, and when Hilary runs into the departing Victor, she decides to follow him. She finds him at their rented home, where he is packing his things in order to run away again from chemotherapy. She convinces him of her great desire to help him fight cancer, and after tears, kisses, and professions of love, the two reunite to face an uncertain future.

DYING YOUNG illustrates once again, like all the Julia Roberts vehicles before it, how filmmakers objectify the image of the beautiful star, not only visually but within the narrative as well. The film contains a major subplot in which Victor instructs Hilary on intellectual subjects of which she has never been privy, one of which is the art of German expressionist Gustav Klimt. Victor, falling for the vibrant Hilary, seems to equate her image with the red-haired woman whom Klimt seemed to paint over and over again. To make the point as obvious as possible, director Joel Schumacher includes a scene in which Hilary stands while watching a slide show of Klimt's art and the faces of the two women--Victor's love and inspiration and Klimt's muse and model--merge into one. By film's end, Hilary is remade by Victor into a perfectly suitable mate: her clothes are different, her hairdo more tame, and her language more refined and meaningful.

Throughout the film, Schumacher's camera lingers on Roberts' famous mile-wide smile, her notorious full lips, her shapely long legs, and her luscious mane of auburn hair. It is as if Roberts becomes merely another prop used in the film; she is as much a part of the set dressing as the elegant oceanside cottage that Victor rents or the large pink cadillac that Hilary drives. Schumacher's early career as a production designer clearly influences his style as a director, as the emphasis is on the look of the film. Schumacher is less concerned with the emotional developments of his characters than with how they appear when emoting.

The creative team behind DYING YOUNG recognizes Roberts' great appeal and has fashioned a film that showcases rather than challenges her. Consequently, her performance as Hilary merely reflects her own glamorous persona. The character of Hilary is designed to be so likable that the

dramatic potential of her relationship with a dying man is never fully explored. Roberts never connects emotionally with Campbell Scott, who was so good in Norman Rene's *LONGTIME COMPANION* (1990) but is underused here. *DYING YOUNG* fails to achieve any hint of significance and becomes a simple presentation of why America loves Julia Roberts. Perhaps its dismal box-office returns and its harsh critical reception suggest that it may indeed be time for Hollywood to give Roberts something new to do. (Reviewed by Greg Changnon.)

Country of Origin: USA

Release Date: 1991

Production Line:

Sally Field and Kevin McCormick for Fogwood Films; released by Twentieth Century-Fox

Director: Joel Schumacher

Cinematographer: Juan Ruiz Anchia

File Editor: Robert Brown

Additional Credits:

Production design - Guy J. Comtois

Art direction - Richard Johnson

Set decoration - Cricket Rowland

Casting - Mary Goldberg

Visual consulting - Neil Spisak

Sound - David MacMillan

Costume design - Susan Becker

Music - James Newton Howard

MPAA Rating: R

Run Time: 105 minutes

Cast:

Hilary O'Neil - Julia Roberts

Victor Geddes - Campbell Scott

Gordon - Vincent D'Onofrio

Estelle Whittier - Colleen Dewhurst

Richard Geddes - David Selby

Mrs. O'Neil - Ellen Burstyn

Cappy - Dion Anderson

Malachi - George Martin

Review Sources:

American Cinematographer. LXXII, August, 1991, p. 28.

Boxoffice. August, 1991, p. R-53.

Chicago Tribune. June 21, 1991, VII, p. 35.

Entertainment Weekly. LXXIV, July 12, 1991, p. 38.

Film Review. September, 1991, p. 28.

The Hollywood Reporter. June 18, 1991, p. 9.

Los Angeles Times. June 21, 1991, p. F1.

The New York Times. June 21, 1991, p. B4.

Newsweek. CXVIII, July 1, 1991, p. 62.

Rolling Stone. August 8, 1991, p. 78.

Sight and Sound. I, September, 1991, p. 38.

Time. CXXXVII, July 1, 1991, p. 76.

Variety. June 18, 1991, p. 2.

The Washington Post. June 21, 1991, p. B1.

Named persons in Production Credits:

Sally Field

Kevin McCormick

Studios named in Production Credits:

Fogwood Films

Twentieth Century-Fox

Screenplay (Author):

Richard Friedenberg

Marti Leimbach

Color

Video Available.

Genre:

Drama, Romance

Notes:

DYING YOUNG also stars Colleen Dewhurst, Campbell Scott's mother.

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