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RSS Tuesday, Mar. 27, 2007

## REVIEW: What Love Is (2007)

By

*What Love Is* tries to answer the question the title asks by cramming emotionally diverse men and women on a small set. A witty spin on romantic comedies, *What Love Is* is an enjoyable exception to the rule that romance and comedy don't mix.

Tom (Cuba Gooding Jr.) excitedly rushes home to his girlfriend on Valentine's Day to find that she has left him. Soon after he gets home, a gaggle of his friends come over to visit. Each of his friends has a special, individual neurosis they shamelessly share with each other. A candid conversation breaks out between the five friends. Eventually a group of equally vocal women arrive to illuminate and chisel at the men's foredrawn conclusions.

Mars Callahan, the writer and director, relies on a lot of battle of the sexes clichés. The women have a potty party in the bathroom. There is a lot of macho prancing about and drinking for the men. While you can tell who will be which by looking at them, the dialogue makes up for the unoriginal characters. *What Love Is* is less a story and more a dialogue. The movie is mostly set in one room and relies heavily on the acting and the script. Mostly the male perspective on dating, relationships, pain and love; the movie uses the cookie cutter characters to try to examine the behavior of real people. There is a gay man, a professional man in a steady relationship, the jerk gangsta, a married man and the nice guy. Men aren't the only characters though. There is a herd of women who eventually arrive to show the feminine perspective.

The screenplay doesn't feel like a natural conversation but it doesn't entirely miss the target either. The film has great flow, winding up emotion and then releasing it with well-timed humor. The "gangsta", Sal, is the loudmouthed blowhard in the film. Sal (Matthew Lillard) spews his derogatory blatherings while crawling around in his own insecurities. Tom (Cuba Gooding Jr.) is lost in his own pain and shock. He jumps into hurt and then into anger. Andrew Daily plays the flaming gay Wayne, newly engaged to a professional soccer player. Wayne's character oozes flamboyance, which is painfully unoriginal, but his monologues are also painfully funny. Mars Callahan is happily married Ken. Sean Astin plays the nice guy George. George refuses to pretend he doesn't like women to play the game to get one. The men share an intimate connection from knowing each other for years. Their conversations are mercilessly frank. Even though the female characters do have their own personalities, I felt they were only there to show the strengths and weaknesses in the men's arguments. They aren't shallow but their focus is definitely to make points about the men's perspectives. Both the school of men and the covey of women call each other out in ways only close friends can.

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Matthew Lillard is my favorite actor in *What Love Is*. He shamelessly puffs himself up, strutting around like a male peacock who is seeing a female peacock for the first time in his life. Squawk, squawk, ruffle, squawk. His performance is frighteningly sincere. He rails on everyone else but only to cover his vulnerabilities.

Cuba Gooding Jr.'s performance leaves much to be desired though. He seems to be pulling his inspiration from previous movies and I expected him to shout out "Show me the money." Most of the character's monologues are done in one solid shot. Gooding's are all done in multiple cut together shots. The editing is poorly done and the performance is obviously sub-par.

There are a few strange scenes in *What Love Is*. There is a spontaneous stripper scene. I haven't decided if I like it or not. I think Mars Callahan was trying to show how the men were objectifying the women but it wasn't in any of their characters to treat women as objects. Even the pig-dog in the group is a gentleman. The scene is extremely funny but it doesn't quite fit the rest of the movie and feels awkwardly out of place.

Even with its faults, I enjoyed *What Love Is*. The writing is funny through the entire movie. Even serious topics are covered with sharpness and powerful wit. "What Love Is" looks like a play filmed and brought to us on screen. If you can appreciate a movie made up primarily of dialogue, you'll enjoy *What Love Is*.

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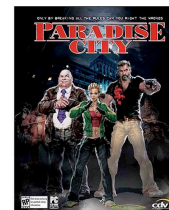
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