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Movie Review

"What Love Is" | Talking talking talking about sex sex sex

By Ted Fry
Special to The Seattle Times

Trawling through scripts and pitches for a date movie that will please both him and her always keeps Hollywood busy. Though there's a sizable demographic for run-of-the-mill chick flicks that will reel in both sexes, most guys would like to get back something more than a handkerchief that the wife or girlfriend has dampened with tears over a formulized fairy tale.



enlarge BIG SKY MOTION PICTURES Cuba Gooding Jr., left, and Mars Callahan play two buddies in a group of friends who spend all their time talking about ... well, you get the idea.

It could be that "What Love Is" is what lovers of either gender can like, thanks to equal parts misogynistic machismo and locker-room girl talk, all of it tied together with just a little bit of cozy romantic reality.

The conductor behind this mix of grabby wordplay about the real world of coupling is writer, director and ensemble co-star Mars Callahan ("Poolhall Junkies"). The gist is a long, late-evening conversation among an ever-expanding cast that talks about sex, love, partnering, breaking up and staying together. These dialogue bursts play out in one-on-one conversations or all-together group exchanges.

Movie review ★★☆☆

Showtimes and trailer

"What Love Is," with Cuba Gooding Jr., Matthew Lillard, Mars Callahan, Sean Astin, Andrew Daly, Anne Heche, Gina Gershon. Written and directed by Callahan.

90 minutes. Rated R for pervasive language including graphic sexual dialogue, and some erotic dancing. Several theaters.

In the center is Tom (Cuba Gooding Jr.), whose Valentine's Day plan to propose marriage is thrown a loop when he comes home to a Dear Tom letter from his longtime girlfriend. His best friend Sal (Matthew Lillard) is first on the commiseration scene, followed by three other childhood pals: Ken (Callahan), George (Sean Astin) and Wayne (Andrew Daly).

The setting for talking sexual politics is complete when a posse of girls from the local bar arrives, invited by the lady-killer Sal before he's heard about Tom's heartbreak. Primary among them are Rachael (Gina Gershon) and Laura (Anne Heche), who are foils for each other in their attitudes about love and sex — not to mention for the guys, who take turns bantering and battling in any number of dust-ups over human mating habits.

All is not perfect. The stagy atmosphere is thick with one-note rat-a-tat dialogue about sex, sex, sex. Amid this fast-talking acting contest, caricatures are barely held in check. Everyone drinks a different beverage to define his or her disposition, and the only gay character is cloaked in lavender with a swish that goes way over the rainbow.

At least there is a rainbow in the range of frankly honest sentiment and enough depth for girlfriends and boyfriends alike to find something worth caring about.

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