

# Letters to Juliet: A mushy bon-bon

By Ramón Valle  
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*Directed by Gary Winick, written by José Rivera and Tim Sullivan*

Filmmakers will sometimes take an oft-told story and, conscious of the clichés its genre offers, try with some creativity to turn those clichés on their head. Sometimes the results are genuinely funny and heartfelt, especially in comedies, romantic ones included. Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* comes to mind (along with a number of Wilder's other films), as does Warren Beatty's *Bulworth*, which make mincemeat of hackneyed sexual stereotypes and trite political phraseology, respectively.

Unfortunately, *Letters to Juliet* is not part of that valuable company. Instead, it opts for safe, predictable ground.

Almost from the beginning, one knows how the boy-hates-girl-at-first-sight component of the plot will end. In fact, if predictability is your cup of tea, then *Letters* will perfectly fit the bill. But the general public deserves better.

This is not to say *Letters to Juliet* is a total fiasco. As someone once said, a good story should be allowed at least one coincidence and perhaps one predictable incident—and it could be added, one cliché—which the audience will readily accept. It is sometimes the way a work can connect the audience to the characters, their emotional truths and perhaps their quotidian lives. But director Gary Winick's film has too many of all of these and gets crushed under their weight. Its tag line does not help matters: "What if you had a second chance to find true love?" Is there any doubt of the outcome?

We are giving nothing away when we tell you that the couple making plans to marry by going on a "pre-honeymoon" to Verona, Italy, will never marry; that the handsome, stuffy young man the heroine serendipitously meets there will treat her with disdain and condescension at first, only to fall madly, madly in

love with her. A long-lost lover will appear. And a main character will climb a balcony via some shrubbery—echoing the iconic scene from *Romeo and Juliet*—and he will most certainly fall, a pratfall to elicit comedic laughter.

Did we say the city of Verona in Italy, where Shakespeare set *Romeo and Juliet*, one of his most popular and enduring tragedies? One knows ahead of time that the images of sunny Italy (Veneto and Tuscany, in this case), so popular with British expatriates trying to escape grey, rainy England, will be luscious, sensuous, picturesque—the perfect setting for the romantic illusions of the middle-class in search of love and redemption.

One can only thank the director and the cinematographer for such small favors; the film, as long as it stays in Italy and the beautiful Veronese countryside, acquires a certain unforced charm as it rolls to its predictable conclusion. But it is not enough to lift us above the predictability of the story or its sentimentality, which borders on kitsch.

Sophie (Amanda Seyfried), a young aspiring writer, travels with her restaurateur fiancé, Victor (Gael García Bernal), to Verona, Italy, just before their wedding. But the fiancé is totally indifferent to her romantic needs and self-absorbed with his profession. He is forever finding excuses to go to meetings, tours and auctions—always without her—in order to advance his career and culinary abilities. She's thus left alone in Romantic Italy, free to explore Verona. No doubt Victor displayed his oafish behavior *before the film began*. So what can Sophie possibly see in such a man? Maybe it's not illogical from the human point of view. But it is a plot contrivance, designed apparently for the sheer predictability of it all: to get our heroine to meet her Romeo.

The narrative, too, is contrived. At the very beginning of the film, Sophie chances on a courtyard whose

balcony supposedly served as the setting of the encounter between the star-crossed lovers, Romeo and Juliet. There we find dozens of young women writing letters to Juliet about their suffering at the hands of fickle lovers. Having loved and lost, they leave their letters to the fictional Juliet between the stones of the balcony wall.

Our innocent American abroad chances (once again!) on a loose stone, removes it from the wall, and discovers a faded letter written 50 years ago by a woman who had abandoned her lover. Our heroine keeps the 50-year-old letter and, as if to exorcise love problems of her own, embarks on a search to find not only the woman who wrote the letter 50 years ago, but also her long-lost love.

The plot's contrivances lead us to one question: why would women write to Juliet, a fictional character who lost at love and *killed herself*? Perhaps not the best person to consult. This is an *illogical* contrivance that further diminishes the film.

Sophie waits; a while later, another woman appears, picks up the letters, puts them in a basket, and walks away. Our heroine follows her and meets the women's club who answer all the letters, which are assigned to individuals by category. She joins the group and asks if she can write to the woman whose letter she had found tucked away in the wall.

She does. A few weeks later, and, much to her surprise, she finds out that the woman to whom she wrote in the name of Juliet, having been inspired by Sophie's answer, is now in Verona looking for her long-lost love—the one to whom she had written that farewell letter half a century ago!

The woman's grandson, Charlie (Christopher Egan)—and our predictable Romeo—berates the heroine for having awakened in his grandmother dreams of love that could never be fulfilled, which, of course, one knows by now they surely will. He treats our poor, suffering heroine nastily for a good part of the film, which now becomes a journey to find the old woman's long-lost lover. The three visit village after village, looking for people with the same name as the old lover. Until finally.... Well, let us say that when Franco Nero appears, we know no further search will be necessary! Should we say he appears riding on a horse and that he's the owner of a large vineyard?

There is nothing wrong with writing, filming or

enjoying romantic comedies; Shakespeare and many famous playwrights have written quite a number of masterpieces in the genre. In some way or another, they seem to have tied their characters to their social life and, therefore, deepened them—that is, the characters—psychologically and emotionally. (Also formulaic, *Shakespeare in Love* [1998] nonetheless did a good deal more along these lines than *Letters to Juliet*.) Characters, therefore, become alive and guide the plot; they drive their stories within a social context as opposed to the plot being imposed on them for effect. But in Winick's film, any social context is non-existent, and the characters indulge in their quest—in a world ravaged by war, economic dislocation, and increasing misery—with nary a preoccupation other than to satisfy their romantic illusions.

And one could argue that predictability in small doses and delivered slowly might connect the audience even more to the characters in a film through empathy. But in this film it comes at the viewer, as Claudius (in *Hamlet*) said of sorrows, in battalions.

To be fair, the performances are uniformly good. Vanessa Redgrave, as always, is luminous and with great subtlety steals every scene she is in. At 73, she can still anchor a film with poise and inner strength. She acts with a conviction and a warmth that melt glaciers. She's joined by Seyfried, García Bernal, Daniel Baldock, and Nero, Redgrave's long-lost love in the film and her real-life husband. The entire cast rises above the material and at times gives the film—despite its predictability and some would say, shamelessly contrived plot—a veneer of reality. The writing, however, remains marooned on a sea of middle-class schmaltz and predictability that run deeper than Hollywood's shallowness, which runs deep indeed.

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