

February 20, 1998

FILM REVIEW; Is He Mr. Wrong? Mr. Right? Whatever, She's Ms. Kvetch

By JANET MASLIN

There have been plenty of urban, neurosis-strewn romantic comedies inspired by the work of Woody Allen, but Julie Davis's spirited "I Love You . . . Don't Touch Me!" has something special: Ms. Davis. As the writer, director, editor and role model behind this enjoyable low-budget date movie, Ms. Davis shows off confidence to burn. Presenting a 25-year-old heroine who is finicky about men to the point of remaining a virgin, her film is bright, energetic and obviously eager to please.

In terms of material, Ms. Davis should have more to work with when she draws on her experiences editing porn promotional spots for the Playboy Channel, as she plans to do. Something about that job gave her the urge to get this first feature off the ground.

Set in Los Angeles, "I Love You . . . Don't Touch Me!" introduces Katie (Marla Schaffel), a young woman who is comically indignant about the men in her life. Even Ben (Mitchell Whitfield), with whom she has a close platonic relationship, gets on Katie's nerves, especially when he starts a torrid affair with Janet (Meredith Scott Lynn), Katie's friend from work. Not having been attracted to Ben before is not, in Katie's mind, any reason not to resent his having a good time without her. The film enjoys its heroine's unreasonableness while remaining firmly planted on her side.

"I Love You . . . Don't Touch Me!" holds few surprises in the story department, since it's clear where Katie is headed from the outset. But the film does an amusing job of involving her with Mr. Wrong, a vain and super-suave composer named Richard Webber (played by Michael Harris). Katie ignores the general rule that it's a mistake to become involved with a man you meet in a traffic accident, especially when that man is driving a yellow Ferrari. And she quickly falls for Richard's oleaginous come-on, which has something to do with comparing women and wine-tasting. When this romance predictably leads to trouble, Katie winds up in a women's discussion group, which prompts her to exclaim, "I feel like I'm in the middle of a Henry Jaglom movie!"

The film is punctuated by such knowing asides, along with quick fantasy sequences and the occasional double-take, handled briskly enough to show off Ms. Davis's editing skills. Thanks to such finesse, the film's unfamiliar cast and shoestring budget wind up looking much more polished than might be expected.

Ms. Davis, who introduced her film at last year's Sundance Film Festival, happens to look and sound very much like Ms. Schaffel, a friend from her teenage years. For this or whatever reason, the film seems tailor-made for its vivacious star, who knows how to flounce, argue, deliver a wisecrack effortlessly and kvetch in style. "Come on, you're gorgeous," somebody tells Katie. "Guys must be knocking down your door."

"Big, sweaty guys named Moe," Katie replies.

Though the film is not rated, it includes lots of bawdy, jokey sexual references and a few discreet sexual situations.

I LOVE YOU . . . DON'T TOUCH ME!

Written, produced, edited and directed by Julie Davis; director of photography, Mark Putnam; music by Jane Ford; production designer, Carol Strober; released by Orion Pictures/Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Running time: 90 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Marla Schaffel (Katie), Mitchell Whitfield (Ben), Meredith Scott Lynn (Janet) and Michael Harris (Richard).

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