

Life, Death - and Everything In Between!



A Tribute to Nora Ephon By Jarrod Emerson SPECIAL FOR FILMS FOR TWO®

Nora Ephon (left) receives Directors Guild of America honors from Meryl Streep (10/1311).
Credit: Elizabeth Pantaleo/ABACAUSA.COM/NewsCom

“Duh, I know who Nora Ephon was. She had a vagina!” quipped my feminist ex-girlfriend as I told her of the veteran filmmaker’s June 26th passing. Surprising – considering my ex’s expertise lies mainly in musical theater, and typically when I bring up a name tied to the film industry I’ve had to endure her saying, “Who’s that?” But, I realized that if I’d been asked what Nora Ephon’s achievements were three weeks ago, at most I could’ve named 3 or 4 of her films. How embarrassing!

Through my research I discovered that “Screenwriter” or “Director” doesn’t even come close to the full scope of who Nora Ephon was. Activist, Feminist, Columnist, Blogger and Novelist were but a few of the other hats she wore. I mean, how many people in this world have published novels, campaigned for JFK, married a famed whistleblower (Carl Bernstein), and written three Oscar-nominated films in one lifetime?

Of one thing I’m certain – Ephon did not approach character development carelessly. Whether the film was light or dark, serious or hilarious, Ephon possessed an uncanny eye for sincerity. Her characters would often be filled with pain, gain strength through love or determination, take risks, and make a difference in the world. Truth be told, I feel like I’m barely covering the tip of the iceberg here, but I hope you will come away with a better idea of who this most talented woman was.

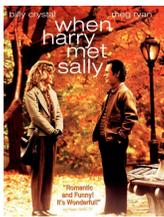
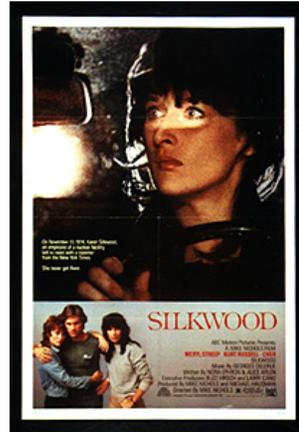
I have viewed the following films that Ephon either wrote or directed:

Bewitched
Heartburn
Julie & Julia
Michael
Mixed Nuts
Silkwood
Sleepless In Seattle

<http://www.films42.com/tribute/ByJarrodEmerson.asp>

When Harry Met Sally
You've Got Mail

I highly recommend
these five Nora Ephron
films →



SILKWOOD 1983, ★★★★★

This is the powerful and true story of Karen Silkwood (Meryl Streep), a plutonium plant worker at Kerr-McGee Cimarron Fabrication in Crecent, Oklahoma. Silkwood's concerns about the constant threat of radiation and what appear to be deliberate safety violations by Kerr-McGee, spur her into becoming an activist. Unfortunately, her new pursuit alienates many of her fellow employees and strains her relationships with boyfriend "Drew" (Kurt Russell) and longtime friend "Dolly" (Cher). Furthermore, it's uncertain how far Kerr-McGee will go to avoid negative publicity.

It's not often that someone's first foray into cinema results in an Oscar nomination. Under the mentorship of director Mike Nichols and co-writer/friend Alice Arlen, Nora Ephron helped craft a truly unique and intimate story. Maybe it was her unused script work on *All The President's Men*, or the success of the similar themes *The China Syndrome*, but Ephron knew what the hell she was doing here. *Silkwood* works so well as a whistleblower tale because it is more intimate than much of the genre. Ephron and Arlen placed great emphasis on Karen Silkwood's personal life – and the toll her crusade took on her.

The film is not a simple thriller, as one might surmise from the movie poster's ominous image of a frightened Streep driving at night. The screenplay wisely bypasses "black and white" in favor of a "shades of grey" approach, something you have to look hard for Hollywood. Sure, certain co-workers and superiors at the plant are unmistakably the picture's "villains", but they have their reasons – times are hard and many fear Karen's crusade has threatened their jobs. Similarly, Karen Silkwood herself is a flawed heroine, but Ephron balances her strengths and weaknesses very well. In one of her many Oscar-Nominated performances, Meryl Streep does a fantastic job echoing this. Streep also has a wonderful down-to-earth chemistry with her two main co-stars, Kurt Russell and Cher, sharing a rather heartfelt scene with the latter.

WHEN HARRY MET SALLY 1989, ★★★★★ “Harry Burns” (Billy Crystal) and “Sally Albright” (Meg Ryan) meet through a mutual friend and share a cross-country drive to NYC. After finding little in common – except a strong dislike for one another – they part ways upon arrival. Through chance encounters over the next several years, a friendship blossoms between the two, even though their friends, Marie and Jess (Carrie Fisher and Bruno Kirby, respectively) suspect something more is happening.

Nora Ephron and Rob Reiner struck gold here. Part of the film’s charm lies in its simplicity. The premise is basic and some would say old fashioned – can men and women ever truly be friends? However, Ephron’s spin is that her characters dissect the dynamics between the sexes in a very real and neurotic way. The film also includes periodic inserts of “mockumentary” fashioned interviews with couples explaining how they fell in love – a nifty touch that Ephron would repeat in her future scripts.

Rather than cardboard cut-out lovebirds, Harry and Sally are cynical about love and are each coming off of painful break-ups, and Ephron’s script does a great job of showing how each cope. The normally purely comedic Billy Crystal makes a very believable leading man, who memorably lets his bitterness out in a great monologue. I particularly enjoyed the Sally Albright character because she is well written, smart and spunky. One of the greatest examples, of course, is the infamous diner scene where Sally calls Harry out on his arrogant claim that he knows all the women he’s bedded are completely satisfied. The film’s examination of male-female dynamics is truly timeless!

SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE 1993, ★★★★★☆ At the wheel one night, D.C. journalist “Annie Reed” (Meg Ryan) tunes in to a radio talk-show just in time to hear “Jonah Baldwin” (Ross Malinger) wish his recently widowed father “Sam” (Tom Hanks) a new wife for Christmas. Sam joins the conversation and pours out his heart. Afterwards, Annie can’t get him off her mind, despite being engaged to “Walter” (Bill Pullman). Meanwhile, Sam starts dating for the first time since his wife’s death, but with little success. Annie begins to wonder if it’s kismet that she and Sam meet, and the answer lies in the classic Cary Grant/Deborah Kerr film *An Affair To Remember*.

Tom Hanks makes a very believable and empathetic widower. He and Ross Malinger have genuine father-son chemistry, with many heartfelt, humorous scenes. Jonah’s determination to help his father find happiness once more is a sweet touch. Meg Ryan shines yet again, this time as the instantly likeable Annie. Though Annie initially does not question her “safe” engagement to the nice, but awkward Walter, we’re relieved when she finally decides to follow her heart.

Sleepless in Seattle is an unapologetically warm film, with the innocence and simplicity of a 1950s melodrama. Nora Ephron modernized take on *An Affair To Remember* breaths new life into the story and its characters, leaving you smiling and crying at the same time. Definitely have a box of tissues handy here!

JULIE AND JULIA 2009, ★★★★★☆ How does one escape the stress of an unpleasant day job? For New Yorker “Julie Powell” (Amy Adams), the way to happiness is to cook her way through each and every one of Julia Child’s 524 recipes in “The Art of Mastering French Cooking” – in just 365 days! With the help of her husband, “Eric” (Chris Messina), Julie sets up a blog to document her progress. Paralleling the tale of “Julie” is the story of how “Julia” (Meryl Streep) discovered her passion for French cooking while residing in Paris with her diplomat husband “Paul” (Stanley Tucci) some fifty years earlier.

For what turned out to be her final film, Ephron served up a delicious dual-adaptation, the ingredients of which are Child’s “My Life in France” and Julie Powell’s “Julie and Julia”. To me,

Ephron never lost her ability to write strong female characters, nor bring a smile to my face. For anyone who has searched for passion in his or her life, I point you straight to this film. Uplifting and inspirational, this is the story of two amazing women who find self-fulfillment in cooking, and gain a huge following in their respective generations. The contemporary Julie Powell scenes and the historical Julia Child's scenes flow so seamlessly back and fourth that we're reminded just how often history repeats itself. Sure, the ride may not always be easy, but these determined women refused to give up on their dreams.

By this point, I'm certain there's one thing Meryl Streep is incapable of: a bad performance! Streep, collaborating with Ephron for the third time, completely disappears into the role of Julia, giving her that cheerful spunkiness that *was* Julia Child. Of course, Meryl doesn't just stop there. Her phenomenal talent with languages and accents amaze yet again, and we are tricked into thinking we're hearing the *real* Julia Child. Amy Adams creates a very believable version of Amy Powell, whose transformation from frustrated, burnt-out bureaucrat to sought after blogger is truly inspiring. Terrific in the roles as the supportive husbands are Chris Messina and the always-wonderful Stanley Tucci. This film is a thoroughly warm, tender and inspirational experience.

YOU'VE GOT MAIL 1998, ★★★☆☆ Friendly neighborhood bookstore owner, "Kathleen Kelly" (Meg Ryan), finds her livelihood threatened when franchise man, "Joe Fox" (Tom Hanks), opens a superstore in the very same neighborhood. While animosity between the two grows stronger with each passing day, sparks of a different nature fly after hours – courtesy of their AOL alter egos.

Can we stomach yet another Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan romantic comedy? Have no fear, Ephron is here – and she does anything but repeat herself. With *You've Got Mail*, Ephron and her sister Delia, have cleverly updated Miklós László's classic play *Parfumerie* (previously filmed as *The Shop Around The Corner* and *Good Old Summertime*) about love blossoming via anonymous correspondence, this time set in the digital age. Ephron has fleshed-out believable three-dimensional characters for whom life is anything but crystal clear. Joe is indeed a wealthy man, but he's a hard working businessman eager to expand his family's business, as opposed to being an elite snob. Kathleen is independent and strong and has a difficult time separating Joe from his business, and in the process may not be giving him a fair chance.

The best part of *You've Got Mail* is how Ephron plays out Joe and Kathleen's email correspondence in voiceover format. I really think this helps to show the contrast of each character's personality, both with and without their corporate/professional masks. Kathleen struggles to get past her image of Joe as an apathetic, rich corporate man who cares little about his customers. Joe is unsure of how to deal with Kathleen's hostility, and hides his identity upon meeting her for the first time. In reality, the two have more in common than they think. Both are carrying on a family business, and both are initially involved with detached, self-absorbed individuals. Though not on par with *Sleepless in Seattle* or *When Harry Met Sally*, *You've Got Mail* is still a clever little love story.

Now, although the majority of Ephron's work is entertaining, smartly crafted and downright witty, some of her work has not held up. The following films fall short of the Ephron we all know and love:

MICHAEL 1996, ★★★☆☆ Disgraced journalist, "Frank Quinlan" (William Hurt), dog trainer, "Dorothy Winters" (Andie McDowell), and photographer, "Huey Driscoll" (Robert Pastorelli), are sent by "Vartan Malt" (Bob Hoskins), editor of a Chicago tabloid, to a small Iowa town to

investigate the unbelievable story of an angel living in the boarding house of “Pansy Milbank” (Jean Stapleton). It turns out that the angel, “Michael” (John Travolta), does indeed exist, but he’s anything but angelic. Michael is on vacation – his last one ever – and he intends to enjoy it! Agreeing to accompany the crew back to Chicago (after all, what better place to party?) Michael leads the gang on a wild romp enroute.

Michael seems to set out to be an old-fashioned hybrid of fantasy and romance, in the vein of Frank Capra. While there are many good ideas present in *Michael*, the results feel rather half-baked. The film has a foot in several genres, and ultimately feels too lightweight because of it. Even though William Hurt and Andie McDowell are intended to be the heavy focus, I found neither of them very interesting. By the time their backstories are presented, it’s too little, too late. The effect might have been better had Ephron either tilted the story more towards their romance, or toward John Travolta’s amusing and occasionally endearing performance as the title character. Instead, we have a thoroughly bland film with isolated chuckles and hints of old-fashioned romance – but little else.

HEARTBURN 1986, ★★☆☆☆ Agonizing over her upcoming wedding to the point of nearly holding up the ceremony, food critic, “Rachel Samstat” (Meryl Streep), finally walks down the aisle with DC columnist, “Mark Forman” (Jack Nicolson). The two buy a Georgetown house and begin renovations and a family in short order – things that stress even the best of marriages. Rachel is dedicated to making the marriage work, but Mark, not so much. Pregnant with their second child, Rachel learns that Mark is having an affair. She leaves, he begs her to return, she does, he continues his philandering ways. Definitely not a happy marriage.

For her sophomore screenwriting effort, Nora Ephron reteamed with *Silkwood* director Mike Nichols to adapt her semi-autobiographical novel about her failed marriage to famed journalist Carl Bernstein. While Ephron means to show underlying tension that eventually erupts, by the time Rachel actually catches Mark cheating, I found myself not caring. While the divorce was painful enough for Ephron to turn into a bestseller, when put on the silver screen it ends up a creaky snooze fest.

MIXED NUTS 1994, ★☆☆☆☆ It’s one crazy holiday season for the people at “Lifesavers”, a struggling suicide prevention hotline. Aside from the fact that no one is calling the hotline and the rent hasn’t been paid in months, the employees have a few problems of their own. “Phillip” (Steve Martin) was just dumped by his girlfriend, “Catherine” (Rita Wilson) is having an emotional breakdown, and “Mrs. Muchnick” (Madelaine Kahn) is just cranky as hell. Meanwhile ex-con, “Felix” (Anthony LaPagila, is squabbling with his pregnant girlfriend, “Gracie” (Juliette Lewis), and lonely transvestite (Lev Schreiber) has appeared at the door. On top of that, a strange serial killer is on the loose. Merry Christmas indeed!

This update of the classic *Le Père Noël Est Une Ordure* marked Nora Ephron’s third time in the director’s chair. “They” say, “Third time’s a charm”, and I would’ve been inclined to agree had *Mixed Nuts* been even remotely funny, which it isn’t. It’s hard to describe what watching this film feels like, but what springs to mind is wiping out on a bicycle in a patch of gravel (without a helmet!). The farcical tone of the film seems very planned, and nearly every comedic moment feels simply too forced. This is a pity considering the names involved (including a young Adam Sandler). Every time I was supposed to laugh I could feel the actors’ uncertainty. Never once did I so much as crack a smile. Perhaps this was because the whole movie felt like one big joke by someone who’s trying way too hard.

BEWITCHED 2005, ★☆☆☆☆ “Isabelle” (Nicole Kidman) is anxious to shed her roots as a witch and live as an ordinary woman, despite the objections of her father, “Nigel” (Michael Caine).

These desires may just do an about-face, however, when desperate actor “Jack Wyatt” (Will Farrell) convinces Isabelle to star opposite him in a revamped version of *Bewitched*. As Isabelle soon discovers, she’s merely pawn in the conceited Jack’s ploy to resurrect his career. Perhaps now isn’t the best time to ignore her powers!

Hmmmm, let’s consider this: take an update of a beloved sitcom, add one of cinema’s most witty women at the helm, and throw in a rather large handful of good actors (contemporary and veteran) into the mix. Sounds like a great idea right? In a nutshell, *Bewitched* brings back memories of senior year history class - I fought to keep my eyes open! Something that had so much potential, especially in the hands of someone as smart as Nora Ephron, goes practically nowhere. Truthfully, the only *remotely* interesting idea in the film is that this updated version of *Bewitched* is a show-within-movie deal, which is somewhat amusing. Will Farrell, who is usually capable in both comedic and somewhat serious fare, fails miserably here, while the rest of the film’s characters are less than interesting. Here’s an idea: Why not simply take *Bewitched* and give it a makeover with early 21st century versions of Samantha and Darrin? The infamous cartoon *Family Guy*, once depicted that scheming toddler Stewie walking out on the film, booking a flight to Hollywood, showing up at Will Farrell’s doorstep, and punching him as he shouts, “It’s not funny!” I wouldn’t dream of hitting Ephron, but I’m with the baby on this one.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

While Ephron misfired, who hasn’t? When the woman had something to say, it was powerful – and we should all feel privileged to have had such a wise person bring her talent to the cinema. Thank you for all the laughs and tears, Nora – I’ll miss you!

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A graduate of Columbia College film school, JARROD EMERSON has been working with Films42.com since 2007. With interests ranging from screenwriting to improv, he is grateful to Jan and Rich for their support, and for giving him a reason/excuse to watch even more movies! The bottom line is: there can never be too much cinema in Jarrod’s life!