



Featuring Meg Ryan and Andy Garcia. Directed by Luis Mandoki. Touchstone Pictures (1994).

VIDEO REVIEW: "When A Man Loves a Woman,

This film shatters the stereotype of the alcoholic as old, male and poor. Meg Ryan in the role of a young, white, middle class woman is married to Andy Garcia, who plays an airline pilot. They have two children, both girls. The eldest is Meg's daughter from a previous relationship, and the younger is a child from her marriage with Garcia.

The early part of the film depicts Ryan as a "social drinker." Several beginning scenes show her being playful and silly while celebrating their wedding anniversary. Ryan is then seen as a counselor in a school setting where a co-worker invites her to to an "end of day winery" to talk about the co-worker's problems. Ryan forgets to call home and returns late. Drunk and self-denigrating, she says "she screwed up again" as she bangs her head against the wall. Garcia and the children soon show the cumulative effects of Ryan's use of heavy alcohol. This family episode is in stark contrast to the seemingly harmless effects of intoxication in the parental relationship in the opening scenes.

Garcia decides that a trip to Mexico to get away from the stress of home and work would help her. Again the social drinker, Ryan stands up in a row boat off the Mexican resort and falls into deep water. Garcia rescues her and says prophetically, "Wringing you out at the end of an evening is not as much fun as it used to be." Ryan responds with the good intentions of the addicted drinker, "I'm going to stop drinking so much; I promise you - I promise me."

An important character in this film is Amy, the Asian-American baby sitter who takes care of the house and children while the parents are away. Amy is aware of the patterns of drinking but does nothing until the day when Ryan comes in late, obviously drunk. Denying her own need for assistance, she sends Amy away. Slapping her child, Ryan then downs aspirin with vodka. She gets into the shower, passes out, cutting herself as she falls through the full length glass door onto the floor. Jess, the older child, is frightened and thinks her mother is dead. She calls her father at work and he directs rescue people to the home.

With Ryan in the hospital and then in a residential treatment center, Garcia begins to understand what the children have known all along: his wife is an alcoholic. The young girls tell their father that Mommy cries a lot in the bathroom. When he finds a bottle in her clothing drawer, he goes to the liquor cabinet and throws out all the liquor in the house. Again, the older child tells him he should wrap the bottles in a paper bag like Mommy does. He understands the child's need to be a part of this ritual cleansing and invites her to join him in smashing the bottles in the trashcan.

The viewers see a few scenes of Ryan at the treatment center. Upon arrival, her bags are searched as part of the "routine" checking

BY PAMELA K. METZ,

Graduate School of Social Work,
University of Denver.

in process. She is shown to a room in what appears to be a large home. Ryan goes through the detoxification process with the support of an African-American woman counselor. When Garcia comes for his first visit, Ryan says to him as he views the diversity of people in treatment, "Whatever you think of these people, think of me. I'm just like them." The film depicts some of the people at the treatment center in extreme characterizations and panders to people's fears about who goes to treatment centers. Two of the people that talked to Garcia were bizarre and threatening; in high contrast to Ryan's cheer leader image. (The film in some measure does not accurately represent the different kinds of people found at residential treatment centers.)

While his wife is at the center, Garcia begins to experience the challenge of being a single parent. The girls are acting out; Amy, the baby sitter is filling in; and his work schedule as a pilot has become more demanding. Chaos and crisis mount at home as he takes his frustrations out on Amy, who refuses to become the scapegoat. She walks out, leaving him to deal with these problems.

Garcia swallows his pride and anger and approaches Amy, seated among her many relatives as they share a meal together in their restaurant. He asks her if she will stay with the children while he meets the demands of his flight schedule. His airline company is downsizing and he does not have the flexibility to stay home while his wife is in the treatment facility. He may

lose his job or be transferred if he cannot work this trip. Amy agrees to return to care for the children in his absence.

When Ryan returns home after drying out, she tries to re-establish her relationship with the two young girls. When Garcia is home, again he steps in and takes over while she is working with the children. This initiates new tension between them as she recreates her life without alcohol. They see a marriage counselor and Garcia eventually moves out of the house. He begins to attend Al-Anon meetings and initially calls them a bunch of losers who feel sorry for themselves. She attends AA meetings and, while not drinking, continues making new friends with people that attend her meetings.

He is transferred to Denver and it appears that, although they love each other, the changes they both need to make may be too much to deal with while living together and remaining married.

Ryan invites him to a six-month anniversary meeting where she will stand up and tell the story of her drinking career. It appears that he will not be able to attend. She tells her story celebrating 184 days of sobriety, adding that each day is difficult. A moment of drama occurs as she ends her story: Garcia, standing in the back of the room, hears what she has said. They embrace, and we believe, as the film makers wanted, they are reunited.

The film gives the uninformed viewer a sanitized introduction to alcohol addic-

tion. Because of the socio-economic status and physical attractiveness of the actors, the film it is easy viewing. The more important messages about alcohol abuse and how it affects others become evident through the lives of the children. The scenes that depict the increasing damage to the children send messages to parents about how their use of alcohol negatively affect their children.

A friend who viewed this video reported that this was like her family when she was a child. The film warns the viewers that, although a family might look fine from the outside, the children of alcoholic parents may suffer long-term scars.

The film also gives the husband an opportunity to ask why he didn't see the problems sooner. When Ryan replies that she hid it from him, she confirms how this can happen even in a marriage where partners are close to one another. In this relationship, Garcia's love for his wife took the form of protector and rescuer, disallowing Ryan's realization of her own competencies. As an airline pilot his schedule allowed him to be absent from daily routines, and their time together was often like dating, with easy access to vacations and resort living. They escaped whenever there was difficulty. In fact, during the post-treatment tension and abstinence at home, Garcia suggests getting away. Meg Ryan's sober response is "Maybe I should learn to live in reality before I try to escape it again." □

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