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'Never Again' takes mature look at dating and love

By ERIC HARRISON
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Remember those romantic movies in the late 1970s and early 1980s about women finding themselves? They all seemed to star Jill Clayburgh as *An Unmarried Woman Starting Over* after realizing, "Heck, *It's My Turn.*"

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about that same woman 20 years later, only this time the story gives equal time to the starting-over unmarried man.

Clayburgh is Grace, a 54-year-old tough cookie left

Movie Details**Never Again****Movie Type**

Comedy,
Documentary,
Romance

MPAA Rating

R
for strong sexual content including graphic dialogue, and for language

Directed By

Eric Schaeffer

Cast

Caroline Aaron, Jeffrey Tambor, Jill Clayburgh, Michael McKean, Sandy Duncan

Written By

Eric Schaeffer

Produced By

Bob Kravitz, Dawn Wolfrom, Terence Michael

Released

Jul 12, 2002
(NY/LA)

Distributed By

USA Films

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alone -- and lonely -- after she sends her daughter off to college. She's decided she doesn't want to fall in love again because "men are big babies, and I don't want to take care of them anymore."

That's why she hasn't been involved with a man for seven years.



Relationships go wrong for the 50-ish characters played by Jeffrey Tambor and Jill Clayburgh in *Never Again*.

Jeffrey Tambor, best known as the sidekick on *The Larry Sanders Show*, is Christopher, a 54-year-old exterminator who plays jazz piano. He was married once, for one year. Since then, he's had a series of relationships, mostly with



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much-younger women, but he always loses interest after six months.

It's never explained exactly why this average-looking, overweight, middle-aged bald guy is such a babe magnet. That's too bad, because the rest of us are dying to know. But his turning point comes when he's unable to perform one night, then learns his bedmate has assumed he's bisexual.

"It's just a vibe," she explains. "It's not a negative thing."

Typical of this film's style is the way it plays down the absurdist aspects of Christopher's decision to explore the possibility he's gay.

The film switches back and forth between Grace's timid reentry into the dating scene (her first date is with a midget, who rejects her) and Christopher's walk on the wild side. Their serendipitous meeting in a gay bar is inevitable. (Christopher first assumes Grace is a transvestite.)

A great part of this movie's



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charm is the maturity of the characters. In movies, it's rare to see people with gray hair and wrinkles enjoying sex and wrestling with dating issues. Writer-director Eric Schaeffer is an astute observer of sexual mores and human nature. His characters ring true psychologically, even when they're doing things no rational person ever would. And they do quite a few of these things. The film embraces a sense of unreality that some might find jarring in a seemingly realistic tale.

This type of material could easily turn mawkish, but the film is peopled with such prickly, strong-willed characters, and it deals so frankly with sexual topics, that it is surprisingly fresh despite the predictability inherent in the romantic-comedy formula. It's just offbeat enough to keep you interested without coming close to bowling you over.

Schaeffer, an actor turned filmmaker, isn't a fluid visual stylist. He doesn't always know where to put his camera, but this doesn't distract much from the witty, perceptive writing

and great acting.

Clayburgh has one scene in a restaurant that's phenomenal, a precisely-controlled explosion of hurt and anger that takes your breath away. And Tambor is a revelation: quietly sardonic, sensitive and strong.

I first saw *Never Again* last year at the South by Southwest Film Festival. I must confess that, as nice as it was to see Clayburgh starring again on screen, I found it distracting that she looked so much older than Tambor. Their characters are supposed to be the same age (and in reality are both 58), but she looks like she could be his mother.

This might be my problem rather than the film's. *Never Again* was a festival hit. I had problems with it, but it was one of the movies you heard people talking about most. When I saw it again recently, Clayburgh's looks bothered me less -- and I liked the movie more -- so perhaps it was just the initial shock of seeing movie characters who look like real people.

The maturity of the characters is part of the movie's point. So shame on me if I can't get past it.

Grade: B

Movie Showtimes

[Angelika Film Center & Cafe - Houston](#)

(1:30 PM), (3:30), 5:30, 7:30, 9:40 PM

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