



Patron: Jim Broadbent
Registered Charity No. 1156478
Friday March 3rd 2017
Maggie's Plan (Cert 15)
dir: Rebecca Miller
Sponsor: Andrew Howard

This review is reproduced with the kind permission of Sight and Sound magazine

Synopsis: Maggie, a single New Yorker, decides to become a mother via artificial insemination. While trying to find a donor, she meets John, a professor at the university where she works. They are attracted to one another and, in spite of John being married to Georgette, another professor, they start a relationship and marry. But Maggie finds John too self-obsessed and unwilling to offer much help in caring for her child and his two children for whom they have partial custody. She decides to reunite him with Georgette who, she has discovered, still loves him. The two end up at an academic conference where John, initially, is very angry to discover Maggie's schemes but agrees to get back together with Georgette and make it work. Maggie returns to her former life, this time with the child she always wanted.

No, it's not an alternative title for the Thatcherite satire of *High-Rise*. Rather, Rebecca Miller's comedy is about a thirty-ish single woman with a fetish for micromanaging the emotional lives of the people around her - to a fault, naturally, and with just enough serio-comic consequences to fill out a 90 minute feature.

Maggie, who works as an undergraduate counsellor at the New School in New York City, is a couple of notches more tightly wound than the life-force sprites played by Greta Gerwig in *Frances Ha* (2012) and *Mistress America* (2015), but the actress is still very much in her sweet spot. She has a genuine gift for playing good eggs who trip, sometimes gracefully, over their own impeccable intentions. Her plan, as the movie opens, is to get pregnant, on her own terms and without the added baggage of a romantic partner (in a pretty good throw-away joke, the fellow who's been tapped to supply sperm reveals that his name is Guy.)

So far, so self-possessed; except that on the even of her insemination, Maggie falls into bed with John (Ethan Hawke), the nervy, wordy and very, very married (with kids) adjunct professor she's been hanging out with around school. (He has given her his latest novel to peruse, which for heady culture vultures such as these is pretty much tantamount to foreplay). John's wife is a brilliant academic (played by a mugging Julianne Moore) and he's tired of being intellectually over-ruled at home as if on a conference panel. Maggie and her modest little apartment represent a lifeboat that the thoroughly emasculated would-be word-slinger dives into without hesitation.

From there, the movie jumps forward in time to find Maggie and John in a new living arrangements as parents - both of their own child and also John's brood, who bristle with ambivalence about the new blended family set-up. The complexity of playing domestic musical chairs is Miller's theme, and her heroine's attempts to control these seating arrangements, figuratively speaking, get ever more desperate and dangerous. The second half of the film spins



into full screwball territory: an honest-to-goodness comedy of remarriage, with Maggie sneakily steering John back towards his ex.

This idea of Maggie as a reverse home-wrecker is a funny one, but Miller - who was a potent, eccentric director around the time of *The Ballad of Jack and Rose* (2005) - is more interested here in keeping her elaborate narrative architecture propped up than in making vital cinema. *Maggie's Plan* is visually uninspired and paced like an episode of a premium cable TV series; the plot points click into place neatly, and that's all. The excellent actors all glide along on autopilot - at this point, Hawke is American cinema's patron saint of monstrous self-involvement, and does it better than anybody else - but there's no spark, no gleam of excitement or madness or cruelty. There's something to be said for pleasant, watchable, mainstream moviemaking. Surely, it's not "More, please."

Credits

Greta Gerwig	Maggie
Ethan Hawke	John
Bill Hader	Tony
Maya Rudolph	Felicia
Travis Fimmel	Guy
Ida Rohatyn	Lily
Wallace Shawn	Kliegler
Julianne Moore	Georgette
Mina Sundwall	Justine
Jackson Frazer	Paul
Monte Green	Max
Director	Rebecca Miller
Screenplay (from a story by Karen Rinaldi)	Rebecca Miller
Director of Photography	Sam Levy
Editor	Sabine Hoffman
Music	Michael Rohatyn
Sound	Jonathan Reyes
Costume	Maglosia Turzanska
Production design	Alexandra Schaller
	USA 2015. 98 mins

Another view

In a modern take on the classic remarriage comedy, Maggie's Plan follows its titular heroine (Greta Gerwig) as she tries her best to duck and dodge cupid's arrows as she dashes toward a dream of single motherhood, a decidedly tricky endeavor. Maggie's only met with folly and frustration as she tries to shape life and love to her liking, and things take a turn for disaster when a family of four become victims to her outrageous schemes.

Writer/director Rebecca Miller proves to have a sharp screwball sense with a comedy that channels Woody Allen neurosis to lightheartedly lampoon millennial angst and faux-intellectualism. There's a post-feminist vibe permeating the film as well, but any weightiness or pretension that brings to the fold is counterbalanced by Gerwig, whose performance is characteristically disarming and delightfully vapid. The surging actress' bubbly eccentricities are her greatest asset, and Miller's given her just the platform to show them off.

We meet Maggie as she confides in her ex Tony (a refreshingly subdued Bill Hader) while walking the streets of New York, ruminating on the fact that none of her relationships have lasted more than six months. She's all but given up on romance but is nevertheless bent on having a baby, a situation she plans to rectify via artificial insemination. Donating his seed to Maggie's cause is artisan pickle maker Guy (Travis Fimmel), a similarly quirky, aggressively polite fellow (he somehow comes off as sweet when he offers to inseminate Maggie the "old fashioned way").

Maggie successfully sidesteps Guy's advances, but another love connection creeps up on her at her job at The New School, where she makes fast friends with adjunct professor John Harding (Ethan Hawke). John's an aspiring novelist and perpetual nervous wreck, mostly because his intellectual arch-rival happens to be his Danish, critical-theorist wife Georgette (Julianne Moore, sporting a humorously thick accent), who's so career-obsessed that she regularly overshadows and neglects her husband's artistic pursuits (their two children bear silent witness to the power struggle). Naturally, the resentful John leaves Georgette and proclaims his love for Maggie, who's surprised to find that her affection for him indeed extends far beyond her admiration for his writing. They soon enter into an affair, splintering John's own family as they start a new one.

It's a happy union at first: Maggie and John have a baby together and she finally breaks her six-month romance record. But after a couple of years, John falls into the same self-absorbed habits that Georgette drove him crazy with. Maggie finds herself on the wrong end of a domestic role reversal, with John becoming the self-obsessed businessman and her becoming the proverbial chopped liver. Suddenly, her old dreams of being as single parent come rushing back, compelling her to devise a wacky plan to reunite John and Georgette that, as fate would have it, blows up in all of their faces. By this point, the irony of the film's title rings crystal clear.

Gerwig's got a knack for playing charming characters with vague mental oddities and a sunburst spirit, and she only seems to be getting better at it. In many ways, Maggie's a contemptible schemer, ruining the lives of others in her feeble attempts to engineer destiny, but Gerwig's got so much compassion and sincerity in her eyes that, even in her worst moments, Maggie's a lovable fool who's a terrible lover and passionate mother all the same.

Miller has a hand in this as well, crafting a story that's mostly driven by poking fun at Maggie's naiveté but never loses sight of the fact that her mistakes are made out of love for her daughter. Hawke does a good job of making John's drastic switch from wounded artist to selfish jerk feel natural (if a bit jarring), but Moore's Danish accent feels like a serious encumbrance to her otherwise pitch-perfect performance. The gifted Maya Rudolph joins fellow SNL alum Hader

as his wife, but they add surprisingly little to the film as Maggie's frazzled confidants. Sadly, they feel more like useful plot-advancers than lived-in characters.

There's a good measure of moral and comedic complexity in Miller's work here, which makes the laughs (even the silly ones, like Guy's bashful passion for his artisan pickles) feel more earned and genuine than the hollow, drive-by gags crammed into most mean-spirited modern comedies. There's an easy flow to the storytelling that feels organic and gives the plot developments and character motivations time to register and sink in. Maggie's Plan is hilarious and sweet, a comedy with a sunny disposition that's not afraid to let its characters get their hands dirty.

Bernard Boo: We Got This Covered

Our next screening: Friday March 10th, 7.30pm Dheepan (France 2015. Cert 15)

Having found a way to escape war-torn Sri Lanka, former Tamil Tiger Dheepan arrives in Paris, accompanied by fellow escapees Yalini and Illayaal whom he passes off as his wife and daughter. Settling into a sparse apartment, he takes a job but finds his determined efforts to put the past behind him and make a new life for the three of them are threatened by the violence that regularly breaks out between the drug gangs haunting the estate. Jacques Audiard's hard-hitting film continues to have topical relevance and was awarded the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2015.