



Lincoln Film Society

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Patron: Jim Broadbent

Registered Charity No. 1156478

Friday June 14th 2024

Girlfriends (PG)

Dir: **Claudia Weill**

With: **Melanie Mayron, Anita Skinner**

Synopsis: Susan Weinblatt and Anne Munroe are longtime roommates and friends. Susan is a struggling photographer who wants to get out of the wedding and bar mitzvah racket to selling the photographs she wants to take, Anne is an aspiring poet and academic who looks to Susan as her primary guidance. Just as they are about to move into a new apartment, Anne announces she is getting married to her boyfriend, Martin. Trying to adjust, Susan goes through a series of new professional and personal relationships trying to find her way, while the two of them have to decide how and if to maintain their friendship in light of all these changes.

Claudia Weill's insouciant New York comedy from 1978 is a little indie gem and lo-fi miracle whose emotional force catches you glancingly. *Girlfriends* now looks like a pop-cultural ancestor to any number of romcoms, as well as to *Single White Female*, TV's *thirtysomething* (in which Melanie Mayron also starred) and *Sex and the City*, and Emma Seligman's recent movie *Shiva Baby*.

Mayron stars as aspiring young photographer Suzie Weinblatt, an unassuming mix of Annie Hall and Alvy Singer. Suzie has to deal with a restless singleton life after her best friend and roommate Anne (Anita Skinner) moves out to get married to a supercilious guy called Martin (Bob Balaban) that Suzie doesn't like very much, perhaps for boring her with his slides from the couple's vacation in Morocco and the ill-fitting top he and Anne bought for her there and embarrassingly made her wear. ("When we go to Italy we're going to write down everyone's size!" he trills.)

It isn't simply that Suzie now has to cover the rest of the rent; she is also quietly devastated at the loss of an intimate friend, which is worse than a romantic breakup. She has no language with which to explain her emotions to herself or even, in a way, to grieve. Because friends – that is, straight "girlfriends", to use a word that has gone out of style since 1978 – are at the centre of the movie. Now she has to throw herself into her professional life, taking pictures at barmitzvahs and weddings to pay the bills while also nursing a serious artistic ambition, and trudging around Manhattan to show her portfolio to magazine picture editors and gallery directors. She makes new girlfriends: a clingy new roommate, Ceil (Amy Wright), who is attracted to Suzie, and rival photographer Julie (Gina Rogak). She also starts dating a man: the preening, demanding Eric (played by a pre-Tap Christopher Guest).



But the most important man in her life is rabbi Aaron Gold, tenderly played by Eli Wallach, who appears to be getting Suzie these barmitzvah gigs. Suzie and the rabbi are clearly close and in one scene they are shown playing chess; Weill almost lets us assume they are father and daughter. But no; the rabbi is a married man with a son, and he has a serious and tragic crush on Suzie, kissing her and asking her to lunch. Of course, this is to end in someone getting hurt. There is something exquisitely sad in the rabbi showing up to Suzie's first exhibition and realising that there is nothing there for him but to offer his fatherly or even grandfatherly congratulations and then leave, almost unnoticed.

Finally there is the relationship of Suzie and Anne itself, which arrives at a kind of reckoning. Something very traumatic has happened in Anne's life, and Suzie is moved to realise that Anne is confiding in her, rather than her husband, whose existence she can't help resenting. But there is still an unbridgeable gulf between them: they have grown apart and there is nothing to be done. *Girlfriends* is a stylish movie about love and the city.

Peter Bradshaw: The Guardian 2021

Credits:

Susan Weinblatt	Melanie Mayron
Anne Munroe	Anita Skinner
Rabbi Gold	Eli Wallach
Bar Mitzvah Boy	Adam Cohen
Terry	Jean de Baer
Eric	Christopher Guest
Denise	Nancy Mette
Martin	Bob Balaban
Hairdresser	Albert Rogers
Director	Claudia Weill
Screenplay	Claudia Weill, Vicki Polon
Music	Michael Small
Cinematography	Fred Murphy
Editing	Suzanne Pettit

USA 1978. 88m

Another View

The Bechdel Test, as overused it may be when writing about art, is an important litmus when examining relationships between women in film. How often do women truly talk to one another on the screen about something other than men? As the women's rights movement fueled the 1970s – its proponents seeking an equal rights amendment and access to abortion, as well as commensurate pay- that revolutionary spirit did not bleed into mainstream filmmaking, most failing the Bechdel Test. The decade was dominated with movies about men doing crime (*The Godfather*), men battling their inner demons (*Apocalypse Now*, *Taxi Driver*) and men investigating the wrongdoing of other men (*Chinatown*). Women's roles may have improved since the '50s and '60s (see Sigourney Weaver in *Alien*) but there aren't many popular films from the decade where two women are the main protagonists who exist outside a relationship bound to men. As for women filmmakers? Try to name a few without resorting to Google.

Claudia Weill's superbly subtle and sensitive *Girlfriends* (1978) has been unfairly left out of the conversation of important '70s films. While much of the film may feel dated, especially the version of a New York City where artists could still live and subsist on the cheap, many of the concerns expressed in *Girlfriends* are still important today. Just look at *Frances Ha* and "Girls" (a show of which Weill directed an episode) to see the conundrums that face the characters in *Girlfriends* still create tension for women today.

While American society once shepherded women into motherhood or a certain subset of jobs, men were encouraged to follow their dreams and to reach for the brass ring of wealth so commonly ascribed to the American Dream. How many films (old and modern) depict marriage and security as the end-game success for women while men get all the glory of becoming rich and famous? As *Girlfriends* opens, Susan (Melanie Mayron) and Anne (Anita Skinner) live together in a small apartment. Susan is Jewish, a photographer who makes a living shooting weddings and bar mitzvahs, but yearns to be an artist with a capital A. Anne is decidedly WASPy and wants to be a poet. Almost immediately, nearly all of Anne's dialogue concerns how her boyfriend, Martin, (Bob Balaban) perceives her writing, how she feels about him, how they become engaged to be married. Susan is having none of it. Her friendship with Anne is more important than any man. It doesn't take long for Anne to move in with Martin, leaving Susan adrift and feeling abandoned.

Though *Girlfriends* may seem like an inappropriate title for a film that mainly follows Susan, it's her relationship with Anne that fuels much of the subsequent action. Cut free and emotionally wounded, Susan flounders through a series of bad choices. As Anne continues to allow herself to be defined by her husband (though Weill and writer Vicki Polon wisely portray Martin as a sensitive and kind character), Susan pushes back with a fervour to remain independent. At one point, Susan admits that all she wants is for Martin to take care of her. Susan snaps, "Oh, for Christ's sake, Anne, you don't need anyone to take care of you!" Yet, neither character is truly happy. Susan is lonely and Anne is afraid of being alone.

According to critic Molly Haskell, "At *Girlfriends*' anguished heart is the terrible and unexpected trauma inflicted when one person deserts a friendship – here, it's for marriage, but it could be for a better job or another partner or something else." We've all had those intense friendships where the bottom falls out and one party ghosts the other. It is a confusing and terrible thing to lose a close a confidante or someone you once thought would be there in your life always. As Susan flails in both her romantic and platonic relationships, she is ultimately trying to get Anne, or someone like Anne, back. Yet, major life changes such as marriage and children can cause rifts in old friendships. In *Girlfriends*, Anne buys in and thinks she wants what has been prescribed for her. Susan wants something different.

Much of *Girlfriends* is an elliptical story of Susan's misadventures. She picks up a hitchhiker (Amy Wright) and then invites her to live with her, eventually souring on the girl because she isn't Anne. She

begins to date a moody artist (Christopher Guest) who she meets at a party but their relationship runs hot and cold. She even almost embarks on an affair with an older rabbi (played with warm energy by Eli Wallach).

Girlfriends works its way to Susan's first photography show, an event that Martin attends but Anne does not. Even though nearly everyone important in her life shows up to support Susan, Anne's absence stings and cuts to the loss that informs Weill's film. Neither character is truly happy with their choices, yet something stops them from reaching out and reconnecting in the way things used to be. Susan yearns to have a conversation with Anne that passes the Bechdel Test. They almost get there in the end. But even when they try, the shadow of men looms large, and still does, over a movie that fights to break away but is wise enough to know better.

Ryan Gilbey < The New Statesman 2021

Our next screening: June 28th 2024.7.30pm The Farewell (2019. PG)

A headstrong Chinese-American woman returns to China when her beloved grandmother is diagnosed with terminal cancer. Grandmother is the only person in the family who doesn't know she's terminally ill and Billi struggles with her family's decision to keep her in the dark as they all stage an impromptu wedding to see grandma one last time.

We are pleased to confirm that the Society will be returning to The Venue in September for an autumn season with a new and slightly bigger programme of films .

Details of the dates and films will be announced at the last film in our current summer season.