

'Used People' laughs, cries with dysfunctional family

TICKETS PLEASE



JOHN MONAGHAN

charts four generations of a family in the summer of 1969 whose lives are changed by a mysterious Italian stranger.

Shirley MacLaine has her best role in years as Pearl, a "fifty-something" Jewish widow. At her husband's funeral, an aged Italian (Marcello Mastroianni) from her Queens neighborhood asks her out for dinner. A widower himself, he claims in no uncertain terms to have loved Pearl for a for the past 23 years.

At first, Pearl is put off by all the attention — she's in mourning after all and he's not even Jewish. Soon his old world charm begins to wear on her. With each act of kindness, from an elaborate Italian dinner to the gift of an air conditioner, he breaks through the years of kitchen duty, guilt trips and sacrifice that have defined her role as both daughter and mother.

Kathy Bates and Marcia Gay Harden play the daughters, both divorced and both with their own unique quirks. Barbara has an eating disorder while Norma, driven crazy by the loss of both a husband and a child, has lost touch with reality. She takes on the personas of movie actresses, dressed at one point like Marilyn Monroe. Behind the bars of a teller's window, her shoulder-length blonde wig and baret come straight from Faye Dunaway in "Bonnie and Clyde."

We share in Norma's ecstasy while watching Anne Bancroft in "The Graduate." The next day,

she lures the Italian's son-in-law to a hotel and strips down to her leopard-skin underwear, backed, of course, by Simon and Garfunkel's "Mrs. Robinson." It's an incredibly funny scene.

There are plenty of tear-jerking moments, too. Family members say such routinely bitter things to one another that Barbara decides she must get away. "I love you, Ma," she says before embarking on a new life in California. "But I need to love you from a distance."

It's a treat to see movies about three-dimensional women, especially when played by powerful actresses such as these. The bits between Jessica Tandy and Sylvia Sydney (it's amazing to think she was in some of Hitchcock's and Lang's early work) are both funny and poignant, especially when they check out the facilities at a nursing home.

Here wheelchair-bound seniors learn French while others receive treatment in a modern hydrotherapy wing. But there's trouble in this seeming paradise. The toilets don't flush without jiggling the handles and escalators give the distinct impression that inhabitants are gliding straight up to heaven.

I didn't see director Kidron's "Antonia and Jane," a low-budget British comedy about mismatched best friends, but can now understand why it had such a healthy run at the Maple last year. Kidron has a charming and unaffected way of cluing into the often bizarre nuances that define family relationships, especially between women.

You can see what fun veteran actor Marcello Mastroianni has depicting an aging Italian Romeo. As a former merchant seaman who has traveled literally around the world, he strings together for Pearl a litany of romantic dialogue (in at least three languages) that could easily suit a girl in every port.

"Used People" is unabashedly sentimental, but it has the right

touch in almost every scene. It recalls "Crossing Delancey" or "Moonstruck," movies about people from different sides of town who come together beneath the glow of impossibly huge harvest moons.

Here, the moon is also shown during this eventful late '60s summer when the first lunar

landing takes place. A man on his rooftop looks up from his telescope and says he can see those first historic steps on the moon. The idea is ridiculous, yet the im-

possible often happens in this richly entertaining slice of life.

If you have a comment, question or suggestion, write to John

Monaghan, Street Scene, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150, or call him at 953-2047, mailbox number 1866, on a touch-tone phone.

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