

# Romantic comedy 'Simply Irresistible'

If movies were culinary treats, you would not find "Simply Irresistible" in any meat-and-potatoes category. It is no loaf of bread, it is no jug of wine, it is not even a box of chocolates. Instead, it is a big, airy mouthful of cotton candy, sort of pretty to look at and distracting enough while it lasts, but ultimately not delivering much more than air and sweet.

Still, there's something to be said for spun sugar, and a piece of fluff can hit the spot now and then. Especially if you're living on love, and looking for a cute date movie around Valentine's Day, you might find that "Simply Irresistible" will suit your taste

and please your palate, down to the last, foamy love scene.

Sarah Michelle Gellar (of TV's "Buffy, the Vampire Slayer") plays Amanda Shelton, owner of a small Manhattan restaurant that's about to bite the dust. There are two good reasons for this: (1) The landlord has just raised the rent on the place, and (2) Amanda can't cook.

One day, while shopping for the restaurant at an outdoor market, she meets Tom Bartlett (Sean Patrick Flanery), a young hatchet who's about to open a cushy new dining spot inside Fifth Avenue's Henri Bendel. The two exchange meaningful glances and some flirtations

chitchat before going their own, very separate ways.

But what neither of them knows is that their meeting has been arranged purposefully by somebody calling himself O'Reilly, who's posing as a crab vendor at the market. All that they don't know is that this O'Reilly guy (Christopher Durang) is a big, angelic Cupid, and one of the deuceuses he sells to Amanda is his crafty side.

Soon, in this time posing as a New York cabbie, O'Reilly gets the couple together again. The scene is Amanda's restaurant, Southern Cross (named for the heavenly constellation?). Amanda is in the kitchen, hiding out beneath a lettuce leaf.

In any case, the Crab Napoleon, looking luscious as love itself and festive as Christmas (if nothing else, this movie will make you ravenous) is served to the anticipatory Tom.

He is, of course, done for at first

magical bite. (With each appar-

ently succulent mouthful,

Flanery does a not-bad, lower-keyed

version of Meg Ryan's memo-

ral restaurant scene in "When

Harry Met Sally.")

Before long, Amanda and Tom are so strongly smitten that many of their surroundings turn into a land of "dreamy dreams," just like in the movies. They could be Fred and Ginger, whirling and twirling across a mirrored-lined, zebra-striped stage. They could be Scarlett and

Rhett, disappearing into

movieland fog. Once, when they kiss, their feet actually leave the ground and their heads bump at the ceiling, as Amanda tries a line from a Disney movie to break the spell. It's all a little

bizarre, and it's certainly

extremely silly. But it sort of

moves along, anyway (despite some lines that fall flat now and then) in that boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-gets-girl way, until it all culminates in a feast for the gods, only it's served to more mortals on opening night at the new Henri Bendel restaurant.

Amanda is at the helm in the kitchen, her suave sous chef (and that persistent crustacean) by her side. Her Prince Charming is waiting in the wings, vi-

lins and vanilla orchids are the

order of the day, there's a charm-

ing bit with a paper airplane

and, oh my, ain't love grand, even

when it goes all gushy and gooey.

Gellar makes a bewitching Amanda. Flanery comes across as a bit of a dork now and then, and it's not always possible to tell if it's his character or him that we're seeing. Dylan Baker is a delightfully uptight Jonathan Bendel, who's efficiently seduced by Tom's assistant (Patricia Clarkson), wielding a couple of heavenly caramel eclairs.

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## 'Message in a Bottle' well cast, but doesn't keep story afloat

BY ANNE LEHMANN

SPECIAL WRITER

Two ingredients are key to making a movie worth seeing: a solid story told by evocative actors. Eliminate either of these elements — and the result is a film forced to limp along on one leg.

Such is the case with "Message in a Bottle," a much-promoted Kevin Costner vehicle which, despite offering a high-octane mix of talent, is unable to keep the loadon story afloat. Besides Costner, the film features Robin Wright Penn and distinguished veteran actor Paul Newman.

Based on Nicholas Sparks'

bestselling novel, "Message in a Bottle" tells the story of Theresa Osborne (Wright Penn), a wounded

divorced woman who quietly devotes

her life to her son and work as a researcher for The Chicago Tribune. While on vacation she finds a bottle that has washed ashore. It is a stirring letter written by a man unable to shake his consuming devotion to a lost love. Intrigued by the romance, Osborne sets out to find the writer of this soulful letter.

Garret Blake (Costner), a North Carolina boat builder, has been unable to find the balance that was once his life since the death of his wife, Lee Carter. Helping him is his father, Dodge (Newman), who, having confronted some uphill battles of his own, cares deeply about his troubled son.

Wright Penn is well cast and does a commendable job of trying to rescue the hard-to-swallow plot. She cannot, however, generate enough heat to make her passion convincing, especially since Costner seems so stilted and uncomfortable in his role. Newman is winning as the life-worn father whose quips offer some sweet moments of comic relief.

## STREET SCENE

### The Cardigans leave 'retro' sound

"Lovefool" in all its '80s pop charm was a certified smash for the Swedish band The Cardigans. But after a year of touring, The Cardigans were time to put that "retro" feel behind.

"I think it's much more interesting to take another step from album to album," said drummer Bengt Lagerberg via telephone from his band's Malmo, Sweden, rehearsal space.

"It's been two years since we recorded the last album ('First Band on the Moon') and that means a lot of touring, and that definitely influenced the new stuff. Also, we felt that before we sounded kind of retro. Now it's more up to date or modern. We thought we couldn't take it any further with the retro sound."

So vocalist Nina Persson, guitarist Peter Svensson, bassist Magnus Sveningsson and keyboardist/acoustic guitarist Lars Johansson headed to Country Hell studios with longtime producer Tore Johansson to revamp their sound.

"On the previous albums and previous tours we were trying to make something completely different when we play live from what you hear on the albums. This time it's the opposite. We're trying to almost copy the album, which means that we bring a lot of electronic stuff, sequencers. It's going to be a lot more heavy."

"Gran Turismo" marks the first time that The Cardigans and Tore Johansson have used computers in the recording studio. "Gran Turismo" switches gears from dreamy, ethereal pop to hard-driving rock to slick pop.

"Gran Turismo" hasn't had the

kind of platinum success that

"First Band on the Moon" had in the United States. Nonetheless, it has given The Cardigans the respect it longed for elsewhere.

"Actually for the first time we'd done really, really well here in Sweden. We used to be like the band that got really really great reviews but didn't sell any albums. Now it's both — great reviews and we sell a lot of albums. For the first time we're playing arenas here."

"That's because of a lot of things. I think one big thing is the Swedes have seen that we're very successful outside of Sweden as well in the States and the U.K. That has an influence on the Swedes as well. I think also the whole scene is getting more into the kind of music that we're

rehearsed space."

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which means that we bring a lot of electronic stuff, sequencers. It's going to be a lot more heavy."

"Learning to sync live music with computer-generated samples has been a feast in itself, he said.

"We've had a lot of (mistakes)

"We hope that doesn't happen on the stage. I don't know if we're taking water above our heads but we'll

**Love story:**  
Sarah Michelle Gellar as Amanda and Sean Patrick Flanery as Tom in "Simply Irresistible."



K.C. BAILEY

## GUIDE TO THE MOVIES

### National Amusements Showcase Cinema

**THEATERS**  
Athenaeum 12/12  
2159 N. Oracle Rd.  
Between University & Speedway  
18131-3260

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