

THE FILMS OF DAVID O. RUSSELL

January 9–February 6, 2011

FLIRTING WITH DISASTER

Saturday, January 29, 6:00 p.m.

1996, 92 mins. 35mm print source: Swank Motion Pictures,

Written and directed by David O. Russell. Produced by Dean Silvers. Photographed by Eric Alan Edwards. Production Design by Kevin Thompson. Edited by Christopher Tellefsen. Costume Design by Ellen Lutter. Music by Stephen Endelman.

Principal cast: Ben Stiller (as Mel Coplin), Patricia Arquette (Nancy Coplin), Tea Leoni (Tina Kalb), Mary Tyler Moore (Pearl Coplin), George Segal (Ed Coplin), Alan Alda (Richard Schlichting), Lily Tomlin (Mary Schlichting).

Review by Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*, March 22, 1996:

For a couple of minutes in the midst of David O. Russell's sneaky, sidesplitting *Flirting With Disaster*, Mel Coplin (Ben Stiller) finds himself the brother of tawny blond volleyball-playing twins. This happy if impermanent accident is nothing unusual for Mr. Russell's wonderfully mad odyssey of a movie, in which a man sets out to find his biological parents and winds up meeting more weirdos than Alice found down the rabbit hole.

Mel's search for his birth parents is nominally what sets this enchantingly loony comedy in motion. That sounds almost ordinary, but it quickly becomes clear that Mr. Russell could spin inspired zaniness out of a trip to the grocery store.

Having made an enormously confident feature debut with *Spanking the Monkey*, Mr. Russell now takes a huge, successful leap into wild ensemble comedy, working with a stellar cast and a

remarkable number of tricks up his sleeve. *Flirting With Disaster* bears less resemblance to his earlier film than it does to *The In-Laws*, another hilarious road movie that starts small and finds itself spiraling into the strangest places. *Flirting With Disaster*, which is vastly more colorful than its tame title, begins reasonably enough with a meeting between Mel and Tina Kalb (Tea Leoni), whose manner is chic and professional even though it's not precisely clear what business she's in. Proclaiming it her mission to reunite Mel with his natural parents, Tina also lets it be known that she's getting divorced, used to be a dancer and sometimes thinks it might be wise to get herself impregnated by a reasonably intelligent man.

Meanwhile, Mel has already impregnated Nancy (Patricia Arquette), his wife, who is just regaining her sexual wiles after the birth of a new baby when she finds Tina parked in her living room. If *Flirting With Disaster* were a conventional comedy, it would settle for that premise and the *Friends*-like fact that Mel and Nancy both work at the Museum of

Natural History. Here, however, the Mel-Nancy-Tina situation is nothing but square one.

Next comes a visit to the parents who raised Mel, played deliciously by Mary Tyler Moore and George Segal. She nags a lot and likes showing off her body. ("I want you to consider my age and ask yourself how I maintain this," she declares, lifting her sweater.) He worries about carjackers in San Diego and uranium poisoning in New Mexico, both of which actually do figure later in the story. So does Mel's father's 60th birthday, which Mel forgets, thus bringing out his mother's priceless frostiness. "It's all right, we'll try it again when he turns 65," she says. "Provided he lives that long. And you're not busy."

Mel and Nancy have dragged Tina along to explain their mission to the Coplins ("This woman strikes me as being very dangerous," says Ms. Moore, glaring at Ms. Leoni), which becomes part of a larger pattern. Extra characters tag along everywhere as the story gets wilder and woollier in ways it would be a shame to ruin.

Since this story thrives so delightfully on the unexpected, let's just say that it makes uproarious stops in San Diego, the Southwestern desert and somewhere near the home of Kellogg's Sugar Frosted Flakes. The film also does for bed and

breakfasts what *Tootsie* did for mimes. (Remember when Dustin Hoffman finally slugged one?) And it has particular fun with the artifacts of ancient hippie culture, which one character describes succinctly as "Jerry Garcia, blah, blah, blah."

Even explaining the roles of some characters would ruin a surprise or two. So suffice it to say that Mr. Russell has cast the film without a misstep, and that the actors showing off various new sides of themselves include Alan Alda (delivering wicked self-parody), Lily Tomlin, Richard Jenkins, Celia Weston and Josh Brolin. Throughout it all, Mr. Stiller makes a superb straight man, while Ms. Arquette fumes beautifully, and Ms. Leoni shows off a sleek resemblance to Annette Bening and fine comic style. Ms. Moore, cast against type with droll effectiveness, delivers the film's whopper of a last line.

Flirting With Disaster shows off fine, nimble cinematography by Eric Edwards, whose credits include all of Gus Van Sant's films. It also benefits greatly from the slow, teasing rhythms of Mr. Russell's distinctive comic style. Mr. Russell isn't afraid to let a long scene build gradually until it gets where it's headed. Audiences won't mind, either. Thanks to this film maker's fine comic acumen, the payoff is always there.

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