

Tom, Thanks for You've Got Mail

December 4, 2019

YOU'VE GOT MAIL (1998)

Directed by Nora Ephron

Written by Nora Ephron

Starring Meg Ryan, Greg Kinnear & Tom Hanks as Joe Fox

Any writer in possession of the conventional quirks that led them to writing in the first place is cursed with a difficulty appreciating their own work. This is common of all creative practices; an Ahabian relationship to elusive perfection. But now and then, the stars align and out pours a phrase void of fat, elegantly balanced between poetic and naturalistic, and impervious even to the most prickly editor. To date, I've written maybe one line so perfect as this. It was for a kids' adventure novel, and it exists now only in my ailing 2012 Macbook. It went, "The fog was thick, like a root vegetable." I might never write so well again, and I can accept that. But Nora Ephron, man... She never ran out. And to many, the quotability of *When Harry Met Sally* is her least improvable work, but for me, nothing beats, "How about some coffee or, you know, drinks or dinner or a movie... for as long as we both shall live?" That one is, rarely and purely, untouchable.

In general, I think this script is tremendous. "*She makes coffee nervous.*" It commands a vernacular so fine-tuned and confident that a viewer has no concern for how absurd the story is. "*Sometimes a guy just wants the impossible.*" This is romantic comedy in a nutshell; outlandish and idealistic but charming enough that one can't help but dive in. "*I was eloquent! Shit!*" Heck, I think it's story-telling in a nutshell; don't serve me something real, serve me something better. Dialogue is not conversation, and characters are not people; these are just comforting resemblances, not unlike how the idea of some intangible cyber lover is not a lover at all - at least not until you meet, and wipe the tears from each others' eyes.

It would be easy to condemn 1998's *You've Got Mail* as an aged-out interpretation of how crude and fragile early online love affairs formed. But I'd argue, on the contrary, it's quite prophetic. "*You think this machine's your friend but it's not!*" Dare I say, emotionally committing to a person via the internet is more ordinary now than it was then. In 2013, I had a pal who moved to New Brunswick and quickly befriended a female coworker. I would get Snapchat messages from him that would feature her in the background. Before I knew it, she and I were Snapping each other, separate of this mutual friend, and six years after effectively meeting online, the mutual friend is blurry in our past and we're getting married next September. We narrowly missed the normalization of Tinder and the like, but our own cyber love story was still plenty timely.

In *You've Got Mail*, TH plays Joe Fox, heir to the soulless Fox Books retail empire. Meg Ryan is Kathleen Kelly, next-generation operator of the charming independent children's book store around the corner. They're both noncommittally involved with other partners while carrying on an anonymous AOL back-and-forth with each other. They share their deepest inner thoughts, never realizing they are in fact professional nemeses. If you want to discuss what elements of this movie don't age well, how about its depiction of the dominance of brick-and-mortar super-stores? Forget *The Shop Around the Corner*, Fox Books would be well beyond its better days too.

Sometimes, after taking in a nice romantic plot, I like to play a little game called *Are They Still Together?* Let's do the math: After several hostile encounters, Joe's family store finally sinks Kathleen's. When it's clear her pre-blogs blogger of a boyfriend, Frank (Greg Kinnear), is out of the picture, Joe swoops in with flowers and attempts to ingratiate himself. He has a certain home-court advantage because, at this point, he knows Kathleen is @ShopGirl, and he can use his inside information to his benefit. It works! When the time is right, he reveals himself to be @NY152, and she weeps happily. "*I wanted it to be you.*" This is after Ephron has attempted to execute a Harry & Sally level friendship in less than twenty minutes. It strains belief, but again, this isn't the real world, and for that reason, sure, let's say they're still together.

The thesis of the film seems to be that the illusion of being right or wrong for someone is artificial and all that really matters is your loving connection. This is a nice idea but I wonder if it risks tricking romance-minded people into overlooking major relationship problems in the name of understanding no relationship is perfect. There's a fine

line between having your differences and being fundamentally averse. Frank shares Kathleen's faith in the cultural necessity of small business, but she doesn't like him very much; okay, forget him then. But Joe squashed her like a bug! She's going to overlook that sordid history just because his Godfather references give her a boost of confidence? For what it's worth, Frank likes *The Godfather* too.

All this scrutiny considered, many TH characters and Nora Ephron's stories are wonderful in spite of themselves, and palatable only for their expert *je ne sais quoi*. I don't know, it just works, and we'd like to think they'd pair up again if they could. Romantisization is, by definition, a route towards comfort, and *You've Got Mail* is not only an example of that, it's a depiction of how we do it with every relationship we ever dare to enter. Nora Ephron is the great illusionist, and Tom Hanks is merely one of her most reliable magic scarves. Whether online or in person, we construct an idea of someone based on how we imagine they could fit into our lives. But in reality, being right or wrong for someone *is* artificial, as are romance and comedy and dialogue and characters and *The Godfather* and communication itself. All that exists is love, and it can't be forced or strategized. Being right for someone is a hopeless woodland fog, and it's thick, like a root vegetable.

Thx!