



Lars and the Real Girl

Ryan Gosling, Emily Mortimer, Patricia Clarkson, and Kelli Garner star in a film written by Nancy Oliver and directed by Craig Gillespie.

By Josef Woodard

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It's hard to know exactly where *Lars and the Real Girl* fits in the range of film genres, and that accounts for this odd, thoroughly lovable film's fundamental charm and power. Lars hovers between eccentric comedy, drama, and European-esque drollery, and just as we find our responses to what's on screen wavering, it poses a central, narrative-guiding question: How do you respond to a man who has fallen in love with an inflatable love doll? Laugh? Wince? Run away with all due haste?

Bucking the sure Hollywood temptation to spell things out, it leaves much unresolved. But this we know: in a small, unnamed Midwestern town, the quiet, aging bachelor Lars (Ryan Gosling, whose performance is truly sweet and haunting) has, in lieu of connecting with a "real girl," ordered up a mail-order, inflatable girlfriend-in-a-box, "Bianca." His family and community move from shock to acceptance of Lars and "Bianca." We learn that our hero's mother died during childbirth and there are hints about a sad, strained upbringing — which come out during

casual chats with the town doctor (Patricia Clarkson) — but neat conclusions or explanatory epiphanies are not in the cards here. In that way, this American film is downright un-American.

Behind all this lyrical malarkey is a team whose résumés defy our cinephiliac prejudices against artists working in the small-screen trenches. Screenwriter Nancy Oliver’s main claim to fame is writing for TV’s acclaimed comedy “Six Feet Under,” and director Craig Gillespie has been directing TV commercials for 16 years. Progressive guitarist-composer-improviser David Torn supplies a spare, offbeat musical score (although too often yielding to the pull of cinematic clichés).

Aside from Gosling’s loopy luminosity in the lead role, the film is graced with subtle, beaming acting turns; Kelli Garner as the real “real girl” we’re rooting for as Lars’s belle, and the underrated, understated Clarkson.

In the final rub, what makes *Lars and the Real Girl* so endearing is the magic trick it works on our own jaded movie-watching sensibilities. Like the community in the story, we evolve from snickers and lascivious leers to compassion, acceptance, and even empathy. Here is a clean, slow, strange, and ultimately touching gem of a film.