

Like many a modern girl, *Sex And The City*, the movie, isn't quite sure what it wants to be. You might even say it has a split personality... sends mixed signals... says one thing but means another. Isn't that just like a woman?



(At this point, I should issue a Spoiler Alert, but I'm pretty sure anyone who cares has already seen the movie...)

SATC begins three years after it left off, and we find that Carrie Bradshaw – a fictional character for all time, thanks to the ever-winsome Sarah Jessica Parker – is still a successful writer (though she never actually seems to write anything), and still happily-in-love with Mr. Big. When Carrie and Big decide to get married “for practical purposes” (i.e. she's afraid to sell her apartment and move into one he's just bought for them, lest they should split, leaving her vulnerable... and he just wants to make her happy), *Vogue* gets involved – along with a smashing Vivienne Westwood gown – and things quickly spin out of control. Soon, a guest list of 75 has exploded to 200, gossip tidbits are appearing on page 6 of the *Times*

, and Carrie is wearing a turquoise bird on her head. In other words, a tender, personal commitment between two people has morphed into a monster, and Big, already a two-time loser at marriage, gets cold feet, sending the initially light-hearted romp of a movie into some dark territory. More on that later.

Meanwhile, Samantha has moved to LA to “manage the acting career” of her much-younger, still-devoted boyfriend Smith, but she seems to spend all her time waiting for him to wake up in the morning or come home at night... so they can have sex. (I suppose there must be *some* career management going on, but if so, it's all happening via cell phone from a chaise lounge by the pool.) Apparently, Samantha doesn't like all this waiting, nor all this midday abstinence. Nor does she like the fact that her life, as she puts it, “revolves around a man.” More on *that* later.

Miranda is the one who “has it all.” She's still living in Brooklyn, where she and her adoring puppy-dog of a husband, Steve, are raising their freckly-precious son, while she continues to pursue her demanding legal career. We learn early on that the couple aren't communicating well, and have not had sex in six months. In her state of perpetual stressed-out exhaustion, this hardly matters to Miranda. Not so, Steve, who confesses one evening – in a state of anguished guilt – that in his lonely frustration, he's had a one-night stand. He begs her forgiveness, but Miranda will have none of it, and promptly moves out, without a second thought to her own culpability or the happiness and security of their child.

And what of sweet Charlotte? Well, she and Harry are living blissfully with their adopted daughter, Lily, and we soon learn that another baby's on the way. We assume Charlotte is a stay-at-home mom, as she is constantly available to her friends, has plenty of time for jogging, and never mentions work. (Unlike the other ladies, who *do*, occasionally, mention it, but never actually *do* it.) She and Harry have a healthy relationship, with lots of love and, yes, plenty of sex. Charlotte is, in essence, the Happy Homemaker. For a large chunk of the movie, she is also its only happy *character*.

The screenwriters aren't quite certain how to treat this inconvenient truth, and ultimately punish her by giving her less screen time and making her the butt of a very tasteless joke involving...

her butt.

What's fascinating about the SATC movie – as reflected in its mixed emotions about Charlotte's situation – is that it's not quite sure what it wants to say, so it keeps undermining its own message. It wants to belt out "Sisters are doin' it for themselves!" or "Girls just wanna have fun," but it can't stop humming "Love and Marriage." The moral we're spoon fed at the movie's end is that we modern women should feel free – and I quote the SATC sage Carrie, here – to "write our own rules." Nothing earth-shattering, it's the same message we've been hearing for several decades now, from all manner of sources. And guess what? We got it! We *know*. We don't need no stinkin' men; and we *sure*

don't need no stinkin' marriage.

But while SATC may be telling us one thing, it's *showing* us another. Near the end of the movie, after much anguish and longing, Carrie and Big realize that, "we were perfectly happy *before*

we decided to get married," and they reconcile. Hence, the requisite lesson in liberation: "Love good, marriage bad." But the movie doesn't leave it there. As it turns out, it wasn't the prospect of marriage, itself, but the

*distortion*

of that prospect – the Bridezilla otherwise known as Carrie – that had given Big pause. Thanks to a fancy dress – and all sorts of pressure from a society that prizes weddings but doesn't much value marriage – Big's Beloved had turned into someone he didn't know. While he might, technically, have "left her at the altar," it was Carrie who abandoned

*him*

first. By the movie's end, she recognizes her own betrayal, forgives Big his, and, having each grown in love, humility, and wisdom...

*they get married after all!*

But does the movie end on this classic celebratory note, à la Shakespearean comedy? Nope. When it comes time for Carrie to sum things up, to offer us final Words of Wisdom at her book reading, the script has her spout some trite Girl Power cant about

*writing your own rules*

. It's a bit confusing, because we've just been shown that the

*old*

rules still apply... that love and marriage still go together like a horse and carriage. Even in The City.

As for Miranda, she finally finds it in her heart to forgive Steve, too, but only after much sulking and self-pity and therapy, during which she never seems to transcend the self-imposed stereotype of "a woman scorned," acknowledge her own faults, or consider making any personal sacrifices for the sake of her family. When the two reconcile – a lovely, joyous scene on the Brooklyn Bridge – we're thrilled to see love triumph, but we're left wondering how the couple will avoid falling back into the same ol' troublesome pattern. As far as we know, Miranda's still committed to her high-stress career, and balancing that with motherhood and wifeliness isn't going to get any easier. So, while the movie's telling us, via the romantic reunion on the bridge (followed by one of SATC's famous – and ridiculously gratuitous – soft-porn scenes in which the lovers make up for those six-plus months) that "having it all" is a breeze as long as you love each other and communicate, it's already *shown* us otherwise. Miranda was miserable

*before Steve*

cheated. Will things be different now?

The storyline that seems *really* bi-polar is Samantha's. In Carrie's opening voice over, we're told that Samantha's "great love" has always been sex. We fans of the show know this was true enough. But with Smith – sweet, sexy Smith who saw her through breast cancer and even shaved his head in solidarity – we'd watched her grow into a woman capable of genuine, selfless love. Now, however, she says she's weary of monogamy, is sick of having sex (and not enough of it) with just one guy. But her story doesn't ring true. She

*says*

the source of her midlife angst is that her life now "revolves around a man." But what the movie *shows*

us is a woman whose life has always revolved around

*sex*

... who seems disoriented and restless now that her relationship has moved past its initial flush, especially at a time in her life when most women fear the loss of their sex appeal. The fact that she's addicted to Botox and gaining weight would suggest she's no stranger to such universal concerns, but Samantha never

*voices*

them. She never asks the question that

*should*

be burning in her mind:

*If I'm no longer a sex goddess, who am I?*

Instead, she dumps her guy and speaks in feminist platitudes even Gloria Steinem wouldn't be caught dead using. When Samantha dismisses Smith – who really *is* a good guy – he asks, "Don't you love me anymore?" Her reply: "'Of course I love you, but I love

*me*

more." Gag. Queue the cheesy 70s music. Do women really talk like this? As we watch Samantha blow out the candles on her 50th birthday cake, her smooth, pretty face aglow, we are asked to applaud her personal growth and newfound freedom and general fabulousness. But how fabulous, really, is her determination to freeze her forehead

*and*

her lifestyle at age 30? Are regular Botox treatments and multiple sex partners really the keys to aging well?

In her beautiful song *Landslide*, Stevie Nicks asked: *Can I handle the seasons of my life?* Have "handling" and "denying" come to mean the same thing? The movie's not sure.

Over drinks one night, Carrie and her assistant, Louise, discuss the real meaning of a text message Louise has just received from a new boyfriend. Carrie declares the suitor's courtly greeting is actually a bootie call. ("I may not text, and I may not get texted, but trust me... the subtext of *that* text is boo-tay," she says.) *Sex and the City*, the TV series, could be described in just those terms, but reversed. The

*text*

of the show was always "boo-tay" (modern women exercising their sexual freedom) while the subtext was that age-old story: the search for true love. Just like modern womanhood, the movie is layered, too – telling us one thing, showing us something else.

The text: Write your own rules!

The subtext? You can't rewrite the laws of nature.