Lars and the Real Girl

Talent: Ryan Gosling, Emily Mortimer, Paul Schneider, Patricia Clarkson, Kelli Garner.

Date of review: Thursday 3rd April, 2008

Director: Craig Gillespie
Duration: 98 minutes
Classification: PG
We rate it: 4 and a half stars.

Lars and the Real Girl may turn out to be both the most bizarre and the most touching independent film of the year. Think of a romantic fable whose central couple is comprised of, on one hand, a man in his late twenties, and on the other hand an anatomically correct, life-sized plastic doll, and you’ll probably have numerous thoughts about either raucous, politically-incorrect comedies or plainly bizarre out-of-left-field weirdness. Lars and the Real Girl is neither; it is, I kid you not, one of the most strangely moving love stories in recent memory, and it is made to work in the way it does by beautifully structured writing, perceptive and subtle direction, and a trio of wonderful performances, particularly that of leading man Ryan Gosling.

Gosling, whom young female cinemagoers will remember as the romantic lead from the rather soppy romance The Notebook, here plays the titular Lars Lindstrom, an intensely introverted young man who lives next door to his older brother and his pregnant wife (the wonderful British actress Emily Mortimer). Lars and his brother have fairly recently lost their parents, and clearly the bereavement has left a deep impression upon the painfully shy Lars. The young man has no significant job to speak of, is looked after by his brother and sister-in-law, and as the film opens we see him, wearing his dowdy clothes and sporting a demure moustache, setting about his lonely life as the Northern American winter sets in. (The film, though its location remains unspecified, seems to be set in somewhere like Minnesota.)

Lars clearly needs some looking-after, and while his brother and sister-in-law become increasingly worried about his introversion and lack of a meaningful social network, an acquaintance alerts Lars to the availability of life-sized, anatomically correct mannequins that are available for purchase over the internet. Lars researches this, and seems to feel that his loneliness will be overcome if he buys himself such a companion. As soon as his doll, “Bianca”, turns up, the lives of Lars’ nearest and dearest and turned upside-down as they try desperately to wean him from the bizarre delusion that Bianca is a real person.

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Patricia Clarkson, the wonderfully dependable actress who plays the small-town’s doctor and psychologist, gives a remarkably warm performance as the medical professional whose help is sought by Lars’ brother; she explains that while indeed Lars is suffering under a delusion, it is a complex and meaningful one, rooted in some deep lack in Lars’ emotional life. Lars speaks to and with Bianca, responds to her needs for food and clothing, and makes it clear that his relationship with her is non-sexual; and the filmmakers render this complex relationship with extraordinary grace and subtlety. As the film progresses, the audience too becomes utterly beguiled by the curious story, and the final fifteen minutes of screen time (during which a real woman, beautifully played by Kelli Garner, attempts to become close to Lars) are deeply moving. An unconventional romance, to say the least, Lars and the Real Girl provides one of the most intelligent and moving takes on love and loss that I have witnessed in the cinema for quite some time. For audiences willing to take a punt on an unusual premise, this beautiful, charming and intelligent film will be bountifully rewarding.

Nick Prescott