

## Betsy's Wedding ★★★½

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**Year of Release:** 1990

Review by Randy Parker

**Country:** USA

**Verdict:** See It

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One of my colleagues was surprised when I told her I was willing to see *Betsy's Wedding*. And she was shocked to hear that I actually liked it. Her reaction was understandable when you consider that the film revolves around Molly Ringwald, who hasn't made a worthwhile film since 1986. But the fact is, *Betsy's Wedding* also is an Alan Alda film. And while Ringwald has been making duds for the last four years, Alda has been involved with several noteworthy projects, including *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *A New Life*.

Written and directed by Alda, *Betsy's Wedding* is a vibrant slice-of-life, mixing a few dramatic moments into a big bowl of whimsical humor. Alda's comic elixir is smooth and refreshing and a welcome change of pace from the usual summer fare.

As bride and groom, Molly Ringwald and Dylan Walsh are the pivotal characters in the film, but they are by far the least interesting. Walsh is a nonentity, with all the screen presence of a door knob. Ringwald is simply unbearable and easily is the weakest link in the chain. She looks hideous with her short-cropped orange hair, red lip-stick and grotesque outfits. She's supposed to be a dress designer, but she looks more like a clown. And to make matters worse, Ringwald's performance is about on par with her appearance.

Thankfully, Alda keeps Ringwald's screen time to a minimum; he is far more interested in the colorful periphery characters. The wedding is just a device to bring together the bride's working-class, Italian family and the groom's rich, gentile family. Ringwald's folks are homey and down-to-earth, with Alda as her free-spirited father, Madeline Kahn as her practical mother, and Ally Sheedy as her lonely sister. Walsh's clan, on the other hand, is prim, proper and ostentatious. When the two families meet and mingle, the movie becomes a

story of culture clash, or as one character puts it, "money versus values."

Sheedy, in a wonderfully understated performance, is one of the film's most pleasant surprises. Sheedy expresses more with just her eyes than Ringwald does with her entire body. It's Anthony LaPaglia, however, who seizes the spotlight. LaPaglia plays Stevie Dee, a suave, overly polite Mafioso who is formally courting Sheedy with old-fashioned chivalry. LaPaglia's sincere but dim-witted character is a riot. And what's uncanny is that LaPaglia is a dead ringer for Robert De Niro, with a little bit of Alec Baldwin thrown in for good measure. LaPaglia seems to have attended the De Niro school of gangster acting, and his inspired performance is partly a tribute to his role-model and partly a rip-off. I don't know whether to say a star is born or a star is re-born, but I do know that LaPaglia's over-the-top performance should not be missed.

The scrumptious comic acting, however, extends well beyond Sheedy and LaPaglia. Joe Pesci, in particular, sinks his teeth into his role as Alda's unscrupulous brother-in-law, a slum lord with mob ties, who is cheating on his wife (Catherine O'Hara). Alda, faced with challenge of both directing and acting, somehow finds just the right comic touch as the bride's financially-strapped father, a carpenter whose dreams are bigger than his wallet. The film adopts Alda's psychological point of view as he tries to plan the wedding—and, more importantly, pay for it.

As a filmmaker, Alda's style of humor is remarkably restrained and tasteful. And while he doesn't have the comic genius of a Woody Allen, Alda does possess the inspiration to make movies which are ten times more entertaining than the slop which usually passes for comedy.

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