

Little Murders ★★★½

Year of Release: 1971

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: See It

Cable channels like Bravo earn their keep by offering cinematic gems which have been buried under pounds of blockbusters and sequels—for instance, *Little Murders*, the 1971 film adaptation of Jules Feiffer's off-Broadway play. Until it popped up on Bravo's schedule, I had never heard of *Little Murders*, which is strange because the movie definitely deserves attention.

Directed by Alan Arkin, *Little Murders* is an utterly unforgettable and provocative pitch-black satire. The movie is set within the violent confines of New York City, and it presents a grim world of neurosis and paranoia.

Little Murders chronicles an unusual romance between the unlikeliest couple. Marcia Rodd is a high strung, head-strong interior decorator; Elliott Gould is an apathetic, socially-withdrawn photographer (who specializes in shooting dung). Gould is a social misfit of the highest order—painfully passive and shy. The two meet when Rodd rescues Gould from some thugs who are beating him to a pulp outside her apartment window. Gould is too indifferent to fight off his assailants so Rodd jumps in and knocks them away with her purse. It's not quite love at first sight, but it is the beginning of a turbulent relationship.

Rodd sees Gould as someone whom she can mold into her ideal mate. She starts by forcing him to have fun: they golf, play tennis, go bowling and ride horses. Love is in the air. Well, sort of: Rodd falls in love with Gould, and Gould ... well, Gould doesn't know what love is, but he finds Rodd "comfortable." And before you know it, she has brought him home to meet her parents, despite his protestations that he doesn't like families.

The dinner with Rodd's family is hysterical be-

yond belief—the movie's *pièce de résistance*. Rodd's mother, father, and brother make for one of the strangest families ever captured on film. Vincent Gardenia is priceless as Rodd's conservative father. Her dense mother, played by Elizabeth Wilson, is a walking cliché who is constantly spewing platitudes, like "It's always darkest before the dawn" and "How far better it is to strike a match than curse the darkness." Jon Korkes is weird enough to give you the creeps as Rodd's off-the-wall brother. I couldn't figure out if he was supposed to be retarded or just incredibly immature: he looks 25, but he has the mentality of Bart Simpson.

Little Murders is bursting at the seams with the grotesquely absurd. Every character is weirder than the one before. Donald Sutherland, for example, has a small but juicy role as the radical preacher who marries Gould and Rodd in a decidedly unorthodox ceremony. Sutherland, sporting a hippie-look with long hair and beard, comes across as a demented, modern-day Jesus-figure—one who gleefully denounces marriage and mocks love. The actors perform their roles with obvious relish and gusto, especially Arkin, who briefly appears on the scene as a mad detective.

It's tempting to praise each performance in *Little Murders* as a tour de force, but it's really more accurate to say that the entire movie is a tour de force—of writing, directing, *and* acting. The laughs pile up on top of one another, but just when you least expect it, *Little Murders* does an about face and turns serious, deadly serious, with some shocking plot twists. As a result, the film is both brutally funny and brutally disturbing.