

Men Don't Leave ★★★

Year of Release: 1990

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: See It

In 1983, Paul Brickman took the world by storm with his directorial debut, *Risky Business*. In the seven years that followed, Tom Cruise became the number one box office draw in America, Dan Quayle became Vice President, Communism crumbled, the Berlin Wall fell, and Paul Brickman—well, he didn't directed a single film. Finally in 1990, the director has a new movie to unleash on the world, and after a seven year wait, it had better be good. And *Men Don't Leave* is pretty good, or at least sort of pretty good. The movie is exceptionally funny: it's funny when it's supposed to be funny and, unfortunately, it's also funny when it's not supposed to be funny.

Jessica Lange plays a plain housewife whose husband dies in an accident, leaving her with two sons to raise and a \$63,000 debt to pay off. What is a single, unskilled mother to do? The answer: sell the pickup truck, sell her beautiful country home, and move to Baltimore where she has been offered a job in a gourmet food shop. Lange quickly discovers that life in the big city is no picnic. First of all, her apartment is small and stuffy. Second, she has an incredibly bitchy boss. Third, her temperamental 17-year-old son is having an affair with a nurse who is in her 20's. Fourth, she is growing apart from her 10-year-old son; he would rather sleep at his friend's house than at home. It's enough to make a struggling mother depressed and lethargic; it's enough to make her stay in bed for five days straight. It's enough, at times, to make you laugh when you're not supposed to. In fact, the audience at the preview screening came down with a collective case of the giggles, due in part to Lange's histrionics and in part to some strategically timed sneezing by someone in the

fifth row.

If I seem to be mocking the film, it's because, however well-intentioned, it simply asks you to swallow too much melodrama. The script, by Brickman and Barbara "Big Chill" Benedek, tries to emulate *Terms of Endearment*, but it never quite makes it. The humor is right on target, but the drama is slightly off-kilter. Part of the problem is that Lange isn't always convincing as the somber, dysfunctional mother, and you sometimes have trouble feeling sorry for her.

Fortunately, the supporting cast is magnificent and keeps the film from crumbling. Joan Cusack is delightfully goofy (as usual) as the nurse who likes to "help people." Cusack is quickly becoming Hollywood's definitive eccentric and one of its best character actors. Arliss Howard gains our sympathy as Lange's persistent suitor, a sensitive musician who sees past her melancholy exterior. The real stand-outs, however, are Chris O'Donnell and Charlie Korsmo. The two young actors are deeply moving as Lange's sons, Chris and Matt, who are having a tough time grappling with their father's death and with the culture shock of moving to Baltimore. Korsmo, as 10-year-old Matt, will simply break your heart. He falls under the influence of a tough city kid and becomes a burglar, stealing VCRs to raise money for lottery tickets. The film is extremely effective when it shifts its attention from Lange to the two boys. In fact, the powerful finale strikes an emotional chord and turns the audience into a symphony of sniffles. *Men Don't Leave* is a solid, entertaining melodrama, but it's not the profoundly moving masterpiece it wants to be.