

'Love You' stretches a bad joke to extremes



Joey (Kevin Kline) is a pizza parlor owner whose womanizing drives his wife, Rosalie (Tracy Ullman), to comic attempts at murdering him in "I Love You To Death."

By Judith Trojan
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — The award for blackest film comedy of the year so far goes hands down to "I Love You to Death" (Tri-Star), a one-joke film about a loving wife who tries and fails to murder her philandering husband. The one joke concerns the fact that she and her bumbling accomplices try five times and still can't kill the guy.

The film, loosely based on a well-publicized true story, charts the downward spiral of Joey Boca (Kevin Kline), a spirited pizza parlor owner who unbeknownst to his wife, Rosalie (Tracey Ullman), is sharing himself sexually with every nubile beauty in town.

At first, his biggest defender and willing servant is Rosalie, who chalks off his public flirtations as harmless, lovable traits of his Italian heritage. But when she catches him openly soliciting a girl in the public library for a sexual rendezvous, Rosalie is devastated, contemplates suicide but ultimately plots Joey's murder instead.

As devout Catholics, Joey updates his sexual scores to his priest in biweekly visits to confession and Rosalie questions her murderous instincts as inappropriate for a Catholic wife and mother. But neither lets morality stand in the way of adultery and attempted murder. In fact, Rosalie's mom (Joan Plowright), a Yugoslavian transplant and household Mrs. Fix-it, eggs Rosalie on and even wires the family car to explode on ignition. No go.

As written by John Kostmayer and directed by Lawrence Kasdan ("The Big Chill" and "The Accidental Tourist"), this fact-based scenario is cartoonish at best. The "loving" couple and their outlandish pals and accomplices are one-

dimensional clowns who carry the film's only joke to bizarre extremes.

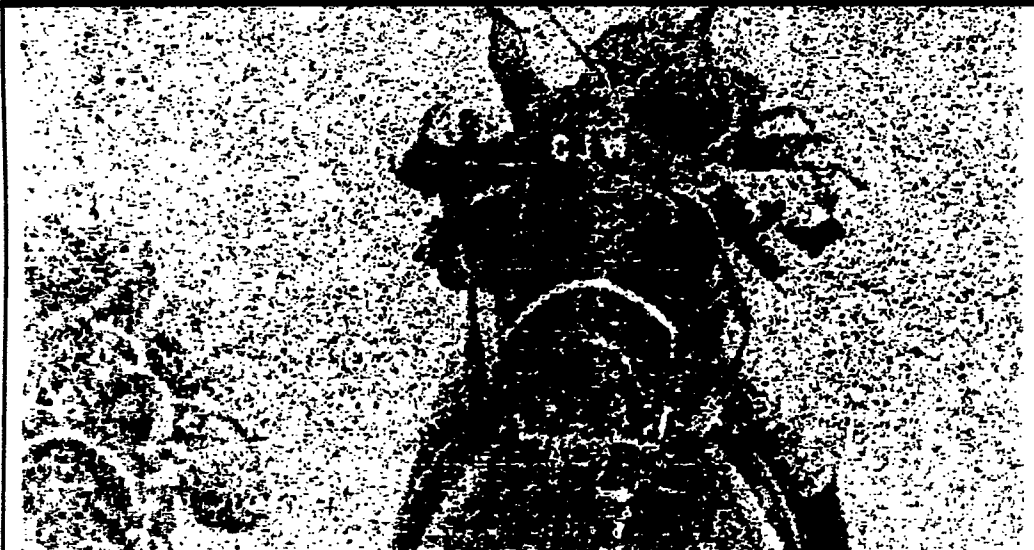
The casting is also odd, to say the least. Kline speaks with a bad Italian accent. Miss Ullman and Miss Plowright, both British, play a frumpy American housewife and a Yugoslavian Lady Macbeth respectively. Young River Phoenix ("Running on Empty") plays Devo Nod, Rosalie's unconvincing hippy confidante; and William Hurt and Keanu Reeves are the brainless, drug-addicted cousins, Harlan and Marlon, who make a brief appearance as nitwit assassins hired by Devo and Rosalie to riddle Joey full of bullet holes. They miss.

Miss Plowright steals the show as Joey's sarcastic mother-in-law, who has no problem with the idea of murder so long as a Johnny Mathis album is playing when the fatal bullet is fired. In her feature film debut, the usually wired Miss Ullman is also remarkably low-key, bland and believable despite her one-note material.

Kasdan seems to have better results if he writes the films he directs. "I Love You to Death" plays a lot like an extended black comedy sketch on "Saturday Night Live." If you think the idea of murdering an adulterous spouse is funny, especially if he won't die after five dopey tries, then this is the film for you. If all of this sounds pretty sick and pointless with little credibility as a reality-based scenario, then best forget this and wait for a better Kasdan effort.

Due to its jokey attitude toward adultery and cavalier acceptance of murder as a viable solution, some rough language and fleeting nudity in a sexual context, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is O — morally offensive. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

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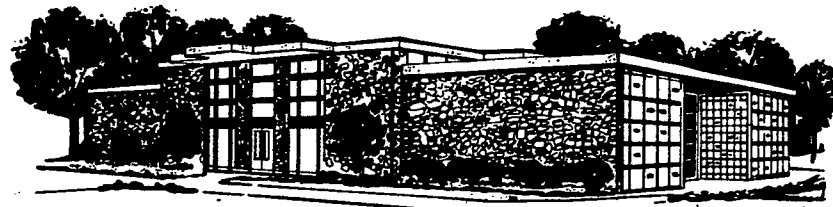
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