

Film's lesson is to appreciate life

By Gerri Pare
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Can an emotionally repressed Jewish widow open up to an impassioned Italian widower who shows up on the day of her husband's funeral to begin courting her?

Such is the question posed by *Used People* (20th Century Fox), the ethnic romantic comedy starring Shirley MacLaine and Marcello Mastroianni.

Pearl Berman (MacLaine) surprises even herself when she agrees to have coffee with a stranger, Joe Meledandri (Mastroianni), from their Queens, N.Y., neighborhood. He tells her he met her husband (Bob Dishy) 23 years earlier, in 1946, and dissuaded him from running out on Pearl and their two daughters.

Now, in 1969, Pearl's girls, dumpy Bibby (Kathy Bates) and vampy Norma (Marcia Gay Harden) are both troubled, divorced mothers and Pearl long ago lost touch with her emotions.

Bibby has moved back in with disapproving Pearl and deeply resents the preferential treatment given Norma, who, in retreating from reality since her baby died three years before, constantly dresses up as Hollywood femme fatales. Lost in this equation is Norma's neglected 12-year-old (Matthew Branton), who sorely misses the stabilizing presence of his deceased grandfather.

The Bermans all snipe at one another but can't seem to express the love they actually feel.

Effusive, irrepressible Joe is just the

opposite. With scant encouragement from Pearl, Joe persists in proclaiming his love for her, even after an Italian feast he prepares for their families ends disastrously.

Further family crises open everyone's eyes to what Joe has been promoting all along — the possibility of a fresh start, a second chance — and not just for Joe and Pearl.

British director Beeban Kidron's first American film features a fine ensemble cast, including Jessica Tandy and Sylvia Sidney, and the performances range from genial to downright endearing. The story as well is a real charmer, if only screenwriter Todd Graff's script didn't so patently work overtime in extracting comedy from the angst of a dysfunctional family. This makes it difficult to get caught up in the movie rather than be continually aware it isn't real, it's a movie.

MacLaine and Mastroianni play off each other very well and Harden stands out in an emotionally complex role she infuses with both comic and

tragic dimensions.

Also well-captured is the sense of family, the ethnic neighborhood and the late 1960s era of the story. The dialogue is less memorable, although Joe's angry response to Norma's four-letter word — "We don't use the mouth we kiss our mother with to spit out garbage!" — stops her dead in her tracks.

Overall, this is a pleasant, feel-good movie that may end too perfectly for realists, but has lots of good things to say about appreciating the gift of love and of life, no matter what circumstances or stage of the game we find ourselves in.

Due to a brief bedroom scene and an instance of rough language, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.



Joe Lederer-20th Century Fox
Joe Meledandri (Marcello Mastroianni), who has been in love with Pearl Berman (Shirley MacLaine) for 23 years, shocks her family when he asks her for a date at her husband's funeral in *Used People*.

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