

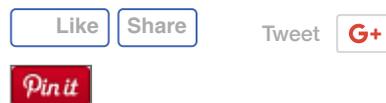


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FRIENDS WITH MONEY

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By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) Mar 10, 2006



Reviews

Part of the charm of Nicole Holofcener's films lies in their autobiographical flavor, like cream skimmed off the tops of her and her friends' lives. Not the cataclysmic boldface events, but rather the lower-case obsessions: women's abiding insecurity, at almost every age, about their bodies (*Lovely and Amazing*), or their possessiveness and envy of girlfriends who marry and "betray" the friendship (*Walking and Talking*).

Now, in the chick-centric comedy-drama *Friends with Money* (which opened the 2006 Sundance Festival), the filmmaker takes on what looks to be her juiciest topic: the impact of financial status on the lives and relationships of four L.A.-based, forty-something longtime friends. Disappointingly, though, Holofcener never hones in on the money thing as much as explores the varieties of discontent that plague marriages, and skims over the perverse downward mobility of their renegade single friend. What Holofcener does get just right, as in her previous films, is the hum of irritation, like some background Muzak, generated by couples who are a lot more fortunate than most of the world.

Jane (Frances McDormand), an asp-tongued designer, can find little right with her goodhearted mate Aaron (the excellent Simon McBurney), who everyone suspects is gay. (In an ongoing joke, he's always hit on by studly guys.) The successful screenwriter team of Christine (Catherine Keener) and husband David (Jason Isaacs) are too busy remodeling their house (and ruining the neighbors' view) to rescue their embattled marriage. Cocooned by wealth, Franny (Joan Cusack) and Matt (Greg Germann) are smug to the point of comatose. Meanwhile, Jennifer Aniston's Olivia defies middle-class logic by cleaning houses for a living and working the cosmetics counters to score free

samples.

In the meatiest role, the reliably fine McDormand's Jane is beset by an amorphous midlife crisis (or early menopause), outrageously venting at husband and strangers alike. But indie stalwart Keener's thin-skinned Christine seems barely distinct from her persona in previous projects. Aniston delivers an amusing, vanity-free Olivia-and almost makes plausible her masochistic liaison with an obnoxious personal trainer, who accompanies her on jobs, sleeps with her there, and then demands a cut.

The trouble is, what's Olivia problem? To her credit, Holofcener doesn't hang backstory on her characters-but Olivia plays like a crazy lady who may very well exist in real life, but simply doesn't jell on screen. Holofcener has the lightest of touches, resisting Hollywood's phony transformative character arcs, and settling more realistically for incremental changes. Still, for all its Sundance cool factor, the latest from this gifted director glances off the viewer without leaving much impact.
-Erica Abeel

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