

Casting Makes the Difference in Quirky Romantic Comedy *Different for Girls*

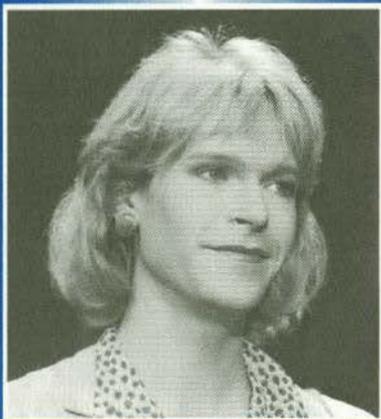
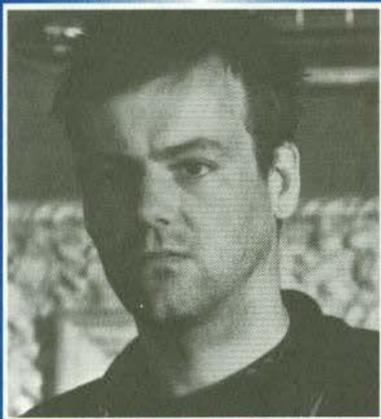
Kim and Paul meet accidentally on the streets of London 15 years after they were in school together, and fall to talking about the old days. It's a perfect setup for romance, except for one thing. When they were in school, Kim was a boy. Now Kim is a very proper, somewhat strait-laced transsexual, and Paul is a swaggering, still-boisterous heterosexual male. It's still a perfect setup for romance, but with a difference.

Different for Girls, an offbeat film from First Look Pictures, gives us a fresh take on the boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-gets-girl genre, set against the gritty cityscape of contemporary London. The film was a recipient of the Grand Prix of the Americas Award at the 1996 Montreal World Film Festival, and received critical praise at the Sundance Film Festival. The producer-director team of John Chapman and Richard Spence initiated the project, based on their mutual interest in issues related to transsexualism, and obtained the services of Tony Marchant for the screenplay. They paid meticulous attention to detail, with transsexual actress and cabaret artist Adele Anderson serving as technical consultant.

What makes this "gender-bending" story work is the casting. ("Gender-bending" is the press release's wording, not this reviewer's. This particular catch-phrase is getting a little stale; what's so unusual about bending genders, anyway?) At first the filmmakers couldn't decide whether Kim should be played by a man or a woman, but then Steven Mackintosh (*Memphis Belle*, *Blue Juice*) expressed an interest, and the matter was settled. Mackintosh's portrayal of Kim is beautifully delicate, at the same time both hesitant and brave, just slightly off-balance — and a perfect counterpoint to Rupert Graves' Paul. Paul is played as brash, immature, charging into situations without a clue, hitting one wall after another. Graves is



REVIEWED BY GARY LAIRD



Prentice [Rupert Graves, above] is a charmingly boyish bike messenger who's accidentally reunited with his best friend from childhood, Kim [Steven Mackintosh, below], who has undergone a sex change.

becoming known as "the other Rupert," and it is confusing. Both he and Rupert Everett (*My Best Friend's Wedding*) are British, roughly the same age and known

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for playing gay roles on stage and in film. Graves is remembered as the young brother in *A Room with a View*, the one who suggests that beautiful skinny-dipping scene, and as the gay gamekeeper in *Maurice*. (If you haven't seen him in these, head for the video store. You'll thank me.)

As played by Mackintosh and Graves, Kim and Paul set out together on a voyage of discovery. Kim has played it very safe, making a lifestyle out of not calling attention to herself. Even her job, writing verses for greeting cards, is safe. But her attraction for Paul is not. Paul is a loose cannon, a 34-year-old teenager with few thoughts beyond the next ten minutes, who barely manages to hold on to a job as a motor-scooter courier. He is everything Kim is not, but opposites attract, and Paul finds himself with feelings he can't handle.

The story plays itself out against the backdrop of present-day London, and derives much of its flavor from the location. This is not the tourist London of Buckingham Palace and Piccadilly Circus. I think I caught one glimpse of St. Paul's dome through the maze of grimy streets. This is the London of the working class, and it has a look of anonymity that enhances the performances.

Predictably, Kim and Paul become more and more involved, in spite of the road-blocks they both put up, and it is the way in which these blocks come down that makes the story so compelling. Paul can't even manage the relatively uncomplicated relationship he has with a girlfriend, and Kim has shut herself off from any possibility of a relationship with a man. Before there can be any kind of a romantic connection between the two, they must each sort out their own outlooks. But there is no denying their attraction for each other, and the situation makes for some funny, and poignant, moments. Their first "date" is just one example.

Different for Girls is, for all its quirks, or maybe because of them, a romantic comedy, and one that works. Throughout the 110 minutes of screen time we spend with Kim and Paul, we find ourselves caring about them, and rooting for them as a couple. The question "A couple of what?" becomes irrelevant. In the end, all that really counts is that they find each other.

Different for Girls is now playing at Landmark theatres.



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