



Expecting

2002 91m *prod* Perch Lake Pictures, *Expecting Productions*, *exp* Thomas Mark Walden, *p* Kirk Johnson, Sharon Petzold, *d* Deborah Day, *story* Cindy Stone, Karen Hill, Deborah Day, *ph* James Griffith, *ed* Lara Mazur, *pd* Alta Louise Doyle, *cos* Robin Kay, *mus* Donald Quan; *with* Colin Mochrie, Valerie Buhagiar, Angela Gei, Debra McGrath, Barbara Radecki, Karl Pruner, Tom Melissis, Derwin Jordan.

To some, being pregnant and having no idea who the father is might be a problem, but to Steph, the arrival of her mystery child will be a surprise.

And in her skewed view, if you're going to have a surprise, you might as well have a party.

Expecting is the story of this eccentric performance artist and her family of friends who pile into her apartment to participate in the birth of her first child.

Steph is slightly flaky but full of spirit. She lives for the moment, and at this moment she just wants her friends to enjoy themselves. Her fussy sister Anita is less concerned about hors d'oeuvres and party hats than she is about Steph's well-being. She comes as the voice of reason, asking her sister to get to the hospital rather than hang around with people who know nothing about "birthin' no babies." But Steph won't be cooped up in a sterile place where she can't dance, and so one by one her friends arrive, the spectators she has called upon to share these days of celebration and excruciating pain.

Dani is Steph's best friend and a ditsy television host who is indebted to Anita's husband Jack for helping her get her own show. Rather than helping Steph as waves of contractions strike, she's constantly trying to thank Jack for his generosity. And it's clear to Anita, by the way Dani follows him around with hearts in her eyes, that she plans to show her gratitude with more than just a thank-you card. Anita is initially bothered by her sister's impromptu bash, which is interrupting her own birthday party, but she begins to realize that there are more important things to worry about when bits of her life begin to fall apart inside the apartment. She must learn to live with things she can't change, and change the things she can't live with or face being left with nothing but her neurosis.

Then there are the men. Gary is a photographer who is called in to make a film about the birthday party. He's an ex-flame of Anita's, who is currently in love with Steph and is planning to propose to her. Ian is Steph's ex-stockbroker-turned-bohemian boyfriend, and Azaan is her creative collaborator and soulmate. Two out of the three are trying to lay claim on Steph—Ian in the hopes of shared parenthood and Gary with an engagement ring—despite the fact that she will never belong to any one person.

In a film like this, where most of the events take place in one small space, the people become the most important part of the story. The power lies in their words and their struggles keep the audience's rapt attention. It's apparent that a lot has happened to Steph and her friends before they were caught on film. And as the credits roll up from the bottom of the screen, it is evident that more is still to come. Without the use of flashbacks, their back stories are conveyed and give their present lives context. Without much action, they ensure that even the quietest moments are full of life. And most of all, it's nice just to watch them talk. There's something beautiful about watching people engage in natural conversations on screen.

As the actors stand and speak about the barbecue's lack of propane, clean the kitchen while talking about haircuts, and cook while joking about bacon, it's all extraordinarily normal and refreshing. Angela Gei, Deborah Day, Cindy Stone and Karen Hill conceived the film, and Day directed, using two DV cameramen shooting 55 hours of footage over 13 days on a single set; a large, trendy Toronto loft. The dialogue was improvised. Day preserved reality in this, her first feature, by allowing the actors to know only a limited amount of the plot before going into each scene. So when characters seem surprised to hear something, it's probably because they are. There is a genuine spontaneity to their reactions. And with a cast of a handful of Second City alumni, the improvisation leads to a hilarious outcome. It's amusing to watch how the women know nothing about childbirth but a lot about how to avoid facial wrinkles when having a contraction.

It's the cast that makes *Expecting* such a fun film. Colin Mochrie, who is known for his improvisational skill (*Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*), gives Gary a nervous generosity that is so attractive it's easy to see why both Anita (Debra McGrath) and Steph (Valerie Buhagiar) have been so close to him. Buhagiar plays Steph with a moodiness that may have been helped by her own pregnancy during filming; and the way she flaps about like a dying fish during the birth brilliantly underscored her character's discomfort at that moment. But McGrath, shining as the anal-retentive Anita, gives a standout performance. The rigidity of this character is both hilarious and heartbreaking. She's the antithesis of Steph, which adds a much needed dramatic element to the film. Though the story has its moments of confusion, the minimal soundtrack and the hand-held filming make *Expecting* look and feel like the kind of film Gary is trying to make—a real document of what happens when a group of close friends spend nearly 48 hours waiting for a child to be born.

Lindsay Gibb

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