

## **Study Guide for Love Serenade (1996)**

### **Facts**

1996, Australia, 101 mins  
Director Shirley Barrett  
Producer Jan Chapman  
Director of Cinematography Mandy Walker

### **Themes**

Romance, fantasy vs. reality, sisterhood

### **Summary**

"We're all odd", says a character in Love Serenade. One thing's for certain - this film is. With its mordant black humor (as deadpan and flat as the landscape in which the film was shot), its eccentric dialog, a certain surrealist tone and a wholly unpredictable ending, there's not much stranger than this to have come out of Australia in a long time.

Ken Sherry is a big fish in a small pond (in more ways than one, as we discover). A minor celebrity DJ from the metropolis of Brisbane, he has escaped - for murky reasons apparently related to some disgrace attached to his recent third divorce - to the very small rural town of Sunray, on the River Murray. 40-something Ken is a shopworn lounge lizard, detached and world weary, and with a seductive voice, full of ennui, to match. It's a voice which is perfect for the kind of rambling, cliché-laden, personal monologues, interspersed with syrupy, overproduced 1970s love songs that make up his on-air performance: "a dissipated Barry Manilow wannabe addicted to fake intimacy" is how one reviewer memorably categorizes him (Turan- see Reviews).

Unwittingly, Ken moves in next door to the Hurley sisters; 30-ish, hairdresser, Vicki-Ann and 20 year old Dimity, who works at the town's Chinese restaurant. The older sister is unspeakably thrilled by Ken's "celebrity" credentials, immediately identifies him as husband material and sets about reeling him in. A firm believer in the route to a man's heart being via his stomach, the prim, perky, man-hungry, Vicki-Ann besieges him with casseroles - and herself with delusions of romantic grandeur. However, to her enormous irritation, it is her younger sister Dimity - socially awkward, insecure, curiously innocent and odd (she seems obsessed with fish) - who inveigles herself into Ken's dubious "affections". Ken takes full advantage of this sibling rivalry and follows his highly unerotic, lazy seduction of Dimity, by giving Vicki -Ann the same treatment.

## **Cultural Context**

### **Sources of the Film**

Love Serenade is the debut feature film for Shirley Barrett (writer and director). Barrett confesses to being an avid reader of women's magazines, especially the "problem pages". Indeed, she has her own collection of favorite questions from these pages, some of which make sly cameo performances in the movie. As an additional source for the film, Barrett admits to having "pilfered from the pathetic scrawlings of ... [her] own youthful diaries" ( Barrett - see Resources).

### **Fish**

The film was shot in 35 days in Robinvale, a small town on the border of the states of New South Wales and Victoria. Robinvale is situated on the River Murray, Australia's longest and most important river (some call it a lifeline, in this, the driest continent on earth) . As Vicki - Ann and Dimity expound to Ken in one scene, the river, at times, can be unpredictable and dangerous to water-skiers and swimmers. Dogs, too, according to the sisters. They get into a heated argument over the cause of death of their own dog, Sooty: Vicki-Ann is convinced that "a hole" in the river "swallowed him up": Dimity believes a fish took him, "a big fish. Probably a carp." Carp make several other appearances in the film's dialog (Dimity's discussion with Albert about "extruding fat", for example). The carp is an introduced species in Australia: it was illegally imported from Germany into Victoria in the 1960's and escaped into the River Murray when the farm dams in which it was being cultivated were flushed by floodwaters. The carp has since developed a reputation as the country's most abundant - but most detested - fresh water fish and has been blamed for a multitude of problems plaguing Australia's rivers. Rightly or wrongly, it is viewed as rapacious and voracious - devouring everything in sight, especially native fish. Given all this, and Ken's characterization as the outsider/lady-killer who comes to town and shakes up the locals, it's hardly surprising then, that he is (apparently, part) carp.

This surreal "fish" subplot is a very odd one (not much in this film is otherwise), but appears to be suggesting that, when it comes to romance - or at least the insidious delusions about love that we absorb through popular culture - men are an entirely different species. Compare, for example, Vicki-Ann's desire to marry a "decent" man, with Ken's playboy claptrap about "loving too hard" (and, more significantly, too many). Or perhaps, the film is mocking the cult of Romance, which produces pathetic, simplistic, "self-help" books with titles like Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus, texts which demean the sheer complexity of male-female relationships?

### **The Soundtrack**

Just what is it about 1970s music and Australian films (see Priscilla, Queen of the Desert and Muriel's Wedding, in addition to this film, for example)? (For more details on the soundtrack to Muriel's Wedding, see the notes on that film on this website). In the case of Love Serenade, the backdrop of overripe ballads, particularly those of Barry White, provides a wonderfully ironic commentary on the sisters' "relationships" with Ken Sherry. As the film's producer, Jan

Chapman, says, the film concerns itself with Vicki-Ann and Dimity's "sad capacity for romantic self-delusion", and she notes that this is only too typical a reaction to the "mysterious world of male/female encounters [which is] usually completely at odds with one's romantic anticipation of these developed through years of novels, magazines, movies and pop songs" (Barrett - see Resources). Maybe it is not only irony which is at work here? One critic, discussing the soundtrack and the fact that these very odd characters have little or no insight into their own actions, comments thus: "in this cracked, hot house world, those throaty extravaganzas [of Barry White] begin to sound as if they're making sense" (Turan - see Reviews). If, as many reviewers have remarked, the film has a surrealist turn to it, then what better to use as musical background than the highly unrealistic view of male/female relationships that popular music (and popular culture in general) presents to us?

### **Viewer's guide**

Think of as many fish-related idioms as you can (e.g. "cold as a fish", "a fish out of water", "other fish to fry"). There are at least a dozen in English. Can each of these idioms be applied to the content or style of film in some way?

Director Shirley Barrett has a collection of her favorite questions from the "problem pages" in women's magazines, and several of these are included in the movie. Can you identify any of them?

The film can be read as providing a wickedly funny critique of the cult of Romance. And so can Muriel's Wedding, another Australian comedy of recent years. In what ways are the two films similar? How are they very different?

In what ways could the film also be said to look askance at the cult of celebrity?

While the film is billed as a comedy, there is also a strong undertone of melancholy. Exactly how does the film evoke this?

How does Love Serenade resemble (parody?) a horror movie?

"Barrett has taken a timeworn Hollywood setup - a stranger rides into town and shakes up the locals - and turned it into something which is fresh and original. One way she pulls this off is by injecting a fable-like quality into the mix" (Stein - see Reviews). What is the "fable-like quality" to which this reviewer refers?

Although *Love Serenade* is a "small" film, set in a rather-neglected small town, with few characters and not much conventional "action", it never feels claustrophobic in the way that some "small" films do. Why is that?

In certain scenes, the humor becomes uncomfortable. In which scenes does this occur and why?

"And then there is a secret, gradually revealed, about the DJ. Is it strange? Very strange. Does it provide the film with an ending that could not under any circumstances have been guessed? It does. Is it necessary? I don't know. The flat, ironic, desperate but hopeful lives of the sisters might have supplied all the humor the movie needed, and Ken Sherry was certainly odd before the final revelations" (Ebert - see Reviews). Do you agree with this reviewer? Is the "fish" part of the plot necessary? Or effective?

Surprisingly, Vicki-Ann and Ken do have something in common. Both have a fondness for cheap, pop philosophy and shallow pseudo-psychology. Witness, for example, Ken's on-air reading of the execrable *Desiderata*, and Vicki-Ann's women's magazine-type spiels ("This man's come to Sunray to heal ... Slowly, bit by bit, he may learn to love again"). What purpose is served by this similarity?

What is the significance of the fact that, while Vicki-Ann does occasionally call him "Kenneth", she almost exclusively refers to the DJ as "Ken Sherry", rather than simply "Ken"?

The scene in which Dimity is climbing the silo with Ken is their only shared scene in which she, rather than he, is in control of what's happening. Why is this significant? And, at what point does it appear that she makes the decision to push Ken off the silo?

Why is Sunray, the fictional town in which the film takes place, so-named?

The film contains a lot of heightened sound. Why are certain sounds treated this way?

A stuntman reportedly died in the scene in which Vicki-Ann, Dimity and Ken are on top of the silo. However, the shot was still used in the film. What is your opinion of this?

If you have a North American copy of the video of *Love Serenade*, take a close look at the cover, especially the actress it features. What relationship, if any, does it bear to the film you have watched? What is the purpose of this cover?

Love Serenade is one of a number of curious, idiosyncratic comedies made in Australia in the nineties (see *Strictly Ballroom*; *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*; *Muriel's Wedding*, for example). Other than the adjectives used above, what do these films have in common?

### **Resources**

Barrett, Shirley. *Love Serenade*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1997.

Brennan, Simon. "Shirley, You Jest: Interview." *Premiere*. 10 (Jul 1997) : 29.

Keens, Leta. "A Tale of Two Sisters." *Bulletin with Newsweek*. 116. 6042 (Oct 15 1996) : 100.

### **Contributor**

Jo Seton, who has a Ph.D. in English from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, is Australian, but also lived many years in New Zealand. She has long had an interest in the film industry in both countries. She worked for the New Zealand Film Archive in its early years, along with various other national cultural institutions in New Zealand. Currently she lives in a small town in the United States. She gets nostalgic about the Antipodes on the rare occasions on which she gets to see a movie from that part of the world.