

What would genuine nonconformism look like?

By David Walsh
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Broken Flowers, written and directed by Jim Jarmusch

This is not inspiring or substantial material.

In the opening moments of *Broken Flowers*, the new work by American independent filmmaker Jim Jarmusch (*Stranger Than Paradise*, *Down By Law*, *Mystery Train*, *Dead Man*) two significant events occur in the life of its central character, Don Johnston (Bill Murray).

First, his girl-friend—apparently the most recent of many—walks out on him, remarking that she feels like his mistress even though he's not married. Second, Don receives an anonymous letter (typed on pink paper enclosed in a pink envelope) from a former lover, informing him that he fathered a son some two decades before and that the boy, aware of his existence, is now looking for him. Depressed and inert, Don merely topples over on his sofa.

The next day, however, his unlikely neighbor, Winston (Jeffrey Wright), an amateur detective, insists that Don write down the names of the women who might be the mother of his long-lost son. Winston then takes it upon himself to arrange a trip that will allow Don to visit the four women on the list, plus the grave of a fifth. Don is to look for certain hints—pink objects, a typewriter—suggested by the mysterious letter he received.

Reluctantly, dubiously, Don sets out. At the first address on his list, he initially encounters the teenage daughter, Lolita (Alexis Dziena), of an old girl-friend, Laura (Sharon Stone). Lolita, who, we eventually learn, has no idea of the significance of her own name, parades around in the nude in front of Don. Disconcerted, he hurries outside, virtually into the arms of Laura, who invites him to dinner. Her husband, a race-car driver, has died in a crash. Don and Laura end up in bed together for the night. There are hints of pink (a bathrobe, a cell phone), but no indication that Laura ever had a son.

The visits get successively chillier. At his second stop, in a sterile subdivision, Don gets reacquainted with a former free spirit, Dora (Frances Conroy), who finds herself trapped in the real estate business, married to a well-meaning, glad-handing clod (Christopher McDonald). Don is unable

to determine for certain whether she ever had a son.

The third woman on his list, Carmen (Jessica Lange), is a psychic who claims to communicate with animals. This fraud is hovered over by a hard-faced assistant (Chloë Sevigny). Don is able only to get a few moments of her valuable time. The fourth, Penny (Tilda Swinton), is appalled by his arrival on her doorstep and he receives a knockout punch from one of her biker friends as his reward. He weeps at the tomb of the fifth former love.

Returning, somewhat worse for wear, from his trip, Don spots a young man he's convinced might be his son. A brief encounter turns sour, but Don is now sufficiently activated to chase the boy down the street.

Presumably Don's voyage into his past and around the country reawakens his interest in life. He meets the four women, who present a series of problems and dilemmas. He sees lives he might have been part of, lives he might have altered, lives that might have altered his: a number of lost or squandered possibilities, or lucky escapes. There is sadness, pleasure and a dose of bitterness in the visits. The dead girl moves him the most. One can sympathize with that.

He also meets younger women—the disturbing Lolita, a friendly girl in a flower shop, Carmen's assistant—who arouse his curiosity and desire. They are further reminders of what once was possible, and of time passing.

The film associates Don in a number of ways with Don Juan, the mythical Latin lover. However, this is a 'Don Juan' who has come face to face with the apparent shallowness of his own behavior and run out of steam. He has nothing to look forward to and the past provides no obvious solace.

Don's situation is contrasted, rather facilely, with that of his black neighbor, Winston, who has a pack of children, a smiling wife, in general, a crowded and bustling house. Don has made his money in computer software, and lives in a large, empty, rather tasteless space.

These are legitimate issues. Don learns to have some respect for Life and other lives.

One could leave it at that. The film is slight, not especially

malicious. Murray is entertaining to watch, even when, or perhaps *especially* when, he does not have a great deal to do. He is not an extraordinary actor, but he is an extraordinary personality, with an uncanny sense of comic timing. He brings a humanity and genuine unevenness to Jarmusch's work that has been sorely lacking.

But Murray cannot make up for everything. Jarmusch has made a reputation as a Lower East Side hipster (born, of course, in Akron, Ohio) and he has no intention of giving that all up without a struggle. The director's trademark has been a generally snide and smug attitude toward humanity. There has hardly been a question on which Jarmusch does not consider himself the 'coolest' character around, and by a wide margin at that.

His condescension, although somewhat reduced by his own efforts and Murray's presence, remains in *Broken Flowers*. It does not take too much digging to uncover that same sense of the director's superiority over nearly everyone he portrays. This is true of each sequence. Jarmusch simply cannot restrain himself. He mocks Laura, the widow of the race-car driver, for the kitsch in her house, her daughter's lack of culture and loose morals, her *own* loose morals, even the manner in which the unfortunate woman sleeps with her mouth open. One is meant to laugh at her, and the others.

If anything, the degree of mockery only increases in the case of Dora, the former 'love child,' and her husband. Jarmusch has an obvious distaste for this antiseptic suburban lifestyle, but how much light does he shed on it? His antipathy is rooted in personal experience, but, as always, an amorphous rebelliousness proves a thoroughly too limited basis for a penetrating picture of life. The majority of the US population now resides in areas described as "suburban." Are all their lives cold, formal, sexless? Such a representation is superficial and unthinking, as well as untrue. A *serious* cinematic treatment of suburban life in contemporary America would represent a great advance. If there are no possibilities of thought and feeling and resistance there, we are in great difficulty.

The unhappy fact is that Jarmusch trades largely in clichés. The aging roué is itself something of a banality. One must say that there is even a touch of moralizing in the filmmaker's approach. We feel that Don is somehow paying for his sins. Which sins? Jarmusch should tell us more. This is the second 'independent' film this year (*Sideways* being the other), in which the male character has been physically assaulted as the result, directly or indirectly, of his sexual indiscretions. Official America's sickening piety is having an impact in unlikely places, perhaps in this case through the conduit of a repressive "political correctness."

A certain artistic-intellectual bad faith is at work in the

film. On the one hand, Jarmusch creates the general impression that Don has victimized all these women in some unspecified fashion (perhaps simply by pursuing 'uncommitted' sexual affairs) and we are meant to feel sympathy for them. On the other, since the director presents the four in an essentially clichéd fashion (sluttish, uptight, self-deluded, etc.), with none of them truly given an opportunity to surprise or act spontaneously, they somehow retroactively 'deserve' their supposed mistreatment at Don's hands. The characters are both patronized and ridiculed at the same time.

In general, the spectator is strongly encouraged (by the director himself, by his admirers, by the media) to believe that Jarmusch is engaging with the contradictoriness of life itself, but, in fact, he deals largely in fixed and known quantities. Winston's jolly household is itself a somewhat patronizing cliché. (And how can he be living next door to a millionaire?)

Filmmakers like Jarmusch have an extremely limited sense of what goes on in the US. They inhabit small, incestuous, quasi-artistic circles, imagining themselves to be the most advanced of men and women. In fact, they settle for vague and pale images, an America that exists largely in their heads. They always miss the important thing, the social mainspring of American life. In *Broken Flowers*, frankly, the images of the New York and New Jersey towns and suburbs through which Don drives suggest *in and of themselves* a complexity that the film's narrative does not. One wants to see more. At present filmmakers lag far, far behind.

With Jarmusch, unhappily, the celebrated 'edginess' and 'quirkiness' tend to camouflage his limited views and understanding and an aversion to truly grappling with life in this country. Jarmusch may have talent and integrity, but it's time to stop making such a fuss over him. So far, at any rate, he hasn't accomplished very much.

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