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'Peggy Sue' Muffs a Promising Trip

SUMMARY: "Peggy Sue Got Married" revolves around the idea of events that occur twice — in this case, Peggy Sue's 18th birthday. Despite the prospects for momentous comedy, the movie is a small, personal love story which is pleasant but haunted by unfulfilled potential.



Turner as Peggy Sue: A second chance

All great historical events occur twice: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.

Karl Marx, who wrote that sentiment, would have made a great movie producer. Callous, tough-minded, ambitious and brilliant (producers *are* smart; it is the actors and directors who drag Beverly Hills toward the mean), he would have known how to make "Peggy Sue Got Married" a farce, not just an amusing string of circumstances. (For the sake of argument, I am neglecting the fact that Karl Marx possessed not a shred of a sense of humor.)

"Peggy Sue Got Married" is about

events that occur twice. The first time Peggy Sue (Kathleen Turner) has her 18th birthday, she has the mind, body and soul of an 18-year-old.

The second time that happy day rolls around, she has the body of an 18-year-old but the mind and soul of a woman of 43. Time bends around for Peggy Sue at her 25-year high school reunion. It has been a traumatic evening because her ex-husband, also her high school sweetheart, shows up, and she has not overcome the bitterness of their divorce.

When Peggy Sue is elected queen of the reunion she is undone. Up on stage, with a cardboard crown on her head, the music blaring and the crowd cheering, she has heart palpitations. She faints, and the next thing she knows she is back in high school, with her old high school body but with the mind and sensibility of her middle-aged self. The year is 1960.

She doesn't even marvel at her recaptured youth. She is obviously a woman who works hard to keep herself looking young, but when that goal is magically realized, she doesn't even pause — not in celebration, not in irony.

Immediately, we know two things: First, this is a brilliant concept for a movie. When a story can pass over a comedy vein that meaty and go on to equally loaded material, it is a concept filthy rich.

Second, "Peggy Sue Got Married" is not going to be a comedy of manners the way "Back to the Future" was. There are going to be no farcical contrasts between '80s hip and '50s innocence. There are going to be no Tab or skateboard scenes, as there were in the Michael J. Fox blockbuster.

There are a few innocent anachronisms ("I think I'll go off and discover the Beatles"), but those jokes are thrown away.

This is where Karl Marx, that wacky old yuckster, could have come in handy. Armed with her knowledge of how the '60s turned out, Peggy Sue could have propelled herself into the forefront of fashion, politics, business, even gambling. 1960 would have been a good year to get to know Steven Jobs, to hang around Robert Redford, to invest in bell-bottoms, to lay money on the Green Bay Packers, to head off the war in Vietnam.

Peggy Sue could have dominated the decade; one senses that under Frank Cap-

ra's directorial hand, she would have.

But today's comedies tend not to be as ambitious as, say, "It's a Wonderful Life" or "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town." "Peggy Sue" is not a far-flung flight of imagination.

Viewers who long for that kind of momentous comedy are going to be disappointed.

Under Francis Coppola's hand, "Peggy Sue Got Married" is a small, personal love story. There are a few scenes of *esprit de l'escalier*; Peggy Sue gets to tell off the people she always wanted to and would have had she the wit and courage. But revenge is not the focus of this movie; affection is.

Peggy Sue goes back and gets to tell her family how much she loved them. She gets to see the grandmother who died and who she has missed. She gets to seduce the one boy in high school she always longed for. And most of all, she gets to head off her disastrous marriage to her high school beau, Charlie.

Or at least she tries. Charlie (Nicolas Cage) is more charming and multifaceted than she appreciated at the time. She cannot resist him, and though she knows that his passions will lead to pain, and that his musical ambitions will be frustrated, she is unable to subdue them. This is a novel romantic situation, one character seeing the romance from the perspective of its jaded end, the other seeing it with rosy dreams for the future.

Nevertheless, it is not entirely effective. Nicolas Cage is no match for Kathleen Turner; he is overdrawn and awkward. Their relationship seems contrived, though not as contrived as her longing for a high school beat poet. (The poet is a buffoon and her affection incomprehensible. Nevertheless, Coppola plays the episode straight.)

Out of the awesome array of possibilities that Peggy Sue's time travel presented, Coppola focused on the least ambitious. His treatment is also, given the recent spate of Eisenhower-era romances, the one that will be most comfortable for mainstream audiences.

In short, he has taken a farcical situation and settled for pap. Karl Marx, that rollicking maniac, would not have done that, and neither would his man-beast buddy Hegel. They knew farce when they saw it. Their problem was that they did not understand that farce is meant to be funny.

"Peggy Sue Got Married" is pleasant, heartfelt and occasionally amusing, but it is haunted by the unfulfilled potential of the story.

— David Brooks