



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Desperately Seeking Susan

Desperately Seeking Susan

Director: Susan Seidelman

Production Company: Orion Pictures Corporation

Executive Producer: Michael Peyser

Producers: Sarah Pillsbury, Midge Sanford

Assistant Directors: Joel Tuber, David Dreyfuss

Screenplay: Leora Barish

Director of Photography: Ed Lachman

Editor: Andrew Mondshein

Production Designer: Santo Loquasto

Art Director: Speed Hopkins

Set Decorator: George De Titta Jr

Make-up: Richard Dean

Music: Thomas Newman

Sound Recording: Les Lazarowitz

Sound Re-recording: Lee Dichter, Sound One

Supervising Sound Editor: Maurice Schell

Cast:

Rosanna Arquette (*Roberta Glass*)

Madonna (*Susan*)

Aidan Quinn (*Dez*)

Mark Blum (*Gary Glass*)

Robert Joy (*Jim*)

Laurie Metcalf (*Leslie Glass*)

Anna Levine (*Crystal*)

Will Patton (*Wayne Nolan*)

Peter Maloney (*Ian*)

Steven Wright (*Larry Stillman DDS*)

John Turturro (*Ray*)

Anne Carlisle (*Victoria*)

José Santana (*boutique owner*)

Giancarlo Esposito (*street vendor*)

Richard Hell (*Bruce Meeker*)

Rockets Redglare (*taxi driver*)

Steve Bosh (*newscaster*)

Daisy Bradford (*Daisy*)

Annie Golden (*band singer*)

Richard Edson (*man with newspapers*)

Ann Magnuson (*cigarette girl*)

John Lurie (*neighbour saxophonist*)

Mary Joy, Rosemary Hochschild

(*cocktail waitresses*)

Iris Chacon (*TV singer*)

Victor Argo (*Sergeant Taskal*)

Shirley Stoler, J.B. Waters (*jail matrons*)

Arto Lindsay (*newspaper clerk*)

Henry Adler (*magic club drummer*)

Marty Gold (*magic club pianist*)

Alvey West (*magic club saxophonist*)

Michael R. Chin (*Choy*)

John Patrick Hurley, Paul Austin (*policemen*)

Timothy Carhart (*Victoria's boyfriend*)

Curt Dempster (*coffee shop manager*)

Shirley Kaplan (*waitress*)

Lazaro Perez (*Enrique, guard*)

John Hoyt (*space commander*)

Gary Ray, Gary Binkow, Michael Bramon

(*band members*)

Joyce Griffen (*prostitute*)

Richard S. Lowy (*Adrian, hairdresser*)

Donna Ritchie (*hot tub girl*)

Kim Chan (*park bum*)

Michael Badalucco (*guy from Brooklyn*)

Elie J. Boubli (*Egyptian ambassador*)

Adele Bertei (*prisoner*)

Pete Castelloti (*coffee shop cop*)

Wende Dasteel, Steve Eidel, Michael Kaufman,

Ilene Kristen, Carol Leifer, Richard Portnow,

Isabel Garcia-Lorca (*party guests*)

Timothy R. Wilson (*bellhop*)

Gilda Tortorello (*Ray's mother*)

Stanley Burns (*ventriloquist*)

USA 1985 103 mins 35mm

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Although *Desperately Seeking Susan* has been sold as a Madonna vehicle directed at the teenage market, its success in the US has been primarily with an older, 'sophisticated' audience of cinephiles. This is partly explained by the cult reputation of Susan Seidelman's first independent feature, *Smithereens*, which dealt with the adventures of a streetwise punkette in the East Side jungle, and can in some ways be seen as a dry run for *Desperately Seeking Susan*, which shares some of the previous film's themes and quirky humour but none of its rough edges. But the success of *Desperately Seeking Susan* is due largely to a clever script confidently handled by a director with a fine visual sense and a talent for screwball comedy. Without making any direct political statements, Seidelman and co have produced a feminist caper film which, in spite of its modest budget, is able to challenge any of the recent efforts by New Hollywood's male directors.

Rather like John Landis' *Into the Night*, *Desperately Seeking Susan* is motivated by the fantasy desire of a bored suburbanite for romance and excitement, which leads her into a dangerous and unfamiliar world, the 'other side' of her routine, straight existence. The object of her fantasy, Susan, is an itinerant character who lives off her wits and sexuality, reminiscent not only of Wren, the heroine of *Smithereens*, but of Chantal Akerman's women in transit, and Hollywood heroines like Claudette Colbert and Carole Lombard. Roberta's fascination with Susan, whom she first discovers through reading the ads in a newspaper personal column, leads her into a labyrinthine web of mistaken identity which allows her to act out her desire for independence – not through any overt feminist commitment, but through a series of accidents which enable her to become someone else for a while, and finally to decide that she likes it that way.

Much of the comic pleasure of the film comes from Roberta and Susan's playing off against one another and the pattern of shifting identities between them. While their attempts to meet are continually frustrated, events cause them to take one another's place: Roberta wears Susan's clothes and retraces her steps, although she is woefully out of place in the role. (Rosanna Arquette displays great comic skill as Roberta, trying and failing to negotiate the world Susan manages with style.) Susan, on the other hand, entering Rosanna's life through an affair with her husband Gary, is undaunted by their suburban lifestyle and simply changes her clothes to match Roberta's chintzy décor, but with a sense of heterogeneous anti-fashion Roberta could never achieve.

It is mostly Roberta who is changed by the drama of shifting identities: her move towards independence brings her closer to Susan, and in a delightful dénouement in which the two women meet for the first time, Roberta saves Susan from the clutches of the villain. (This is all the more enjoyable because the attempts of the male characters to protect and save the two women are sadly ineffective.) They also (contrary to Susan's usual philosophy, a sign that she too has changed, becoming more responsible) turn in the priceless earrings which are the cause of all the trouble, claiming a huge reward and becoming national heroines, while Roberta leaves her dull, crass husband for the far more interesting projectionist Dez. Fairytale material, perhaps, but

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Rio Bravo

Wed 1 Jan 12:20; Thu 9 Jan 20:20;
Mon 27 Jan 14:30

New Jack City

Thu 2 Jan 18:00; Sat 25 Jan 20:30

Moonlight

Thu 2 Jan 20:30; Wed 8 Jan 18:00 + intro;
Fri 17 Jan 20:35

The Wizard of Oz

Fri 3 Jan 12:15; Sat 18 Jan 12:30;
Wed 22 Jan 18:00 + intro

The Way We Were

Fri 3 Jan 18:15; Mon 13 Jan 20:35;
Thu 23 Jan 12:30; Wed 29 Jan 18:00 + intro

8 Mile

Fri 3 Jan 20:45; Fri 24 Jan 17:25

Jailhouse Rock

Sat 4 Jan 12:10; Mon 20 Jan 20:30 + intro by
Adrian Wootton, Chief Executive, Film London and
British Film Commission

The Man Who Fell to Earth

Sat 4 Jan 17:50; Sun 12 Jan 12:20; Fri 31 Jan 20:20

Boyz n the Hood

Sat 4 Jan 20:40; Tue 21 Jan 17:55;
Tue 28 Jan 20:50

The Blues Brothers

Sun 5 Jan 15:30; Tue 7 Jan 20:20;
Sun 26 Jan 15:15

Desperately Seeking Susan

Sun 5 Jan 18:20; Fri 10 Jan 20:30

Videodrome

Mon 6 Jan 18:10; Sat 11 Jan 21:10;
Thu 16 Jan 21:00

From Here to Eternity

Wed 8 Jan 20:35; Wed 15 Jan 18:00 + intro;
Sun 19 Jan 11:45; Thu 30 Jan 20:40

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Roberta's progress to self-definition through her identification with the free-wheeling Susan is indeed the stuff of feminist fantasy, and it is to the filmmakers' credit that they have both recognised the positive power of fantasy and explored its contradictions so wittily.

Pam Cook, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, September 1985

Susan Seidelman on 'Desperately Seeking Susan'

It's odd that in the 60s and 70s, when Women's Liberation was taking hold politically, women in films were either earth mothers or deadly boring. I've always preferred feisty people with a bit of guts, whether they are men or women. That's why I like the older comedies, those by directors like Preston Sturges or Billy Wilder, which had spunky women characters. I watched a lot of them before making *Desperately Seeking Susan*. There is also a tradition of tough women characters in political films, which were important to make, but not exactly fun. I was lucky to come at a time when other people had made the kind of films which allowed us to take feminism for granted. To some extent, everyone involved in the film considered themselves feminists, but also felt that part of having truly liberated characters was to allow them to be playful. When I first read the script, it reminded me of *Céline and Julie Go Boating*, which I thought I was one of the few moviegoers in the States to have caught. Leora Barish's script had the women characters doing very different things, but it had some of the spirit I liked so much in *Céline and Julie*. When I spoke to her about it once, she said yes, it had been her inspiration too.

It's very interesting that over the last few years fantasy films have become very popular. I don't know if that's specifically a female thing affecting women, or if it is attacking the culture as a whole. Throughout the 60s, social realism was very popular, with films about issues, about couples going through divorces, films with unhappy children. But right now, movies have become more escapist, maybe because people are all struggling to get ahead and worried about their jobs. Imagination has got to be a positive thing in its effects, though. It shows you ways of talking about the other possibilities open to you. I was never a big fan of *Star Wars* and sword and sorcery movies, which seem to be just escapist. *Susan's* a comedy, but to me it has more irony than straight teenage comedy. It's emotional comedy where you are involved with the characters, but it also has a satirical edge about the way people live in the 80s, with Roberta cooking with her video cassette and Gary selling jacuzzis and hot tubs. To me that's social satire, and they are the bits I'm particularly interested in.

Interviewed by Jane Root, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, October 1985