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Finding unexpected romance in 'Never Again'

Middle-age relationships get an amusing but sensitive treatment in this pleasant comedy.

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By **CRAIG OUTHIER**

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On the heels of his breakout success in "My Life's In Turnaround" (1994), writer-director-actor Eric Schaeffer wasted little time using his newfound indie clout to surround himself with supermodels. Unfortunately, audiences had little desire to see Schaeffer pine for the likes of Elle Macpherson in "If Lucy Fell" (1996), and the movie summarily tanked at the box office.

Fortunately, there aren't any supermodels in "Never Again," a pleasantly daft comedy about middle-age sex and romance that represents a more mature side to Schaeffer as a filmmaker, no pun intended.

Jill Clayburgh and Jeffrey Tambor, Schaeffer's co-stars in the since-canceled NBC sitcom "Everything's Relative," star as Grace and Christopher, a pair of 50-something lonely hearts each secretly desperate to spend their remaining years happy and in love but both too jaded to admit the possibility of finding that somebody special. "I don't think it's possible, and I don't want to do it," Christopher says flatly.

After a chance meeting at a gay bar - Christopher's sexual anxieties account for some of the funniest scenes in the movie - the graying lovebirds hit it off, falling wildly in love and then, somewhat



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predictably, falling prey to the insecurities that caused them to proclaim "Never again!" in the first place.

From time to time, Schaeffer's sitcom sensibilities go unchecked, resulting in humor that plays out stiltedly on the big screen. When we meet him, Christopher - an exterminator and part-time jazz musician - is so distracted by his own loneliness that he walks into an elevator without any pants on. Ha-ha. Jill, for her part, is so flummoxed by her advancing years that she mistakes her ex-husband's trophy wife for her own daughter. Ha-double-ha. Other gags involving midgets and uncooperative marital aids follow.

Plenty of the humor in "Never Again" hits the mark, however. As usual, Tambor ("The Larry Sanders Show") is a deadpan delight. Caroline Aaron and Sandy Duncan are great as Grace's foul-mouthed gal pals, and Clayburgh, the '70s siren who once scored an Oscar nomination for Paul Mazursky's "An Unmarried Woman," gives her most fiery, vulnerable performance in recent memory. Michael McKean ("This is Spinal Tap") has a hilarious cameo as a friendly she-male sex fiend.

"Never Again" ends with a whimper as screenwriter Schaeffer appears to run out of gas, but it succeeds as a rather misty-eyed and hopeful love story about the possibility of starting over.



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