

# Ashton Kutcher, Natalie Portman With ‘No Strings Attached’

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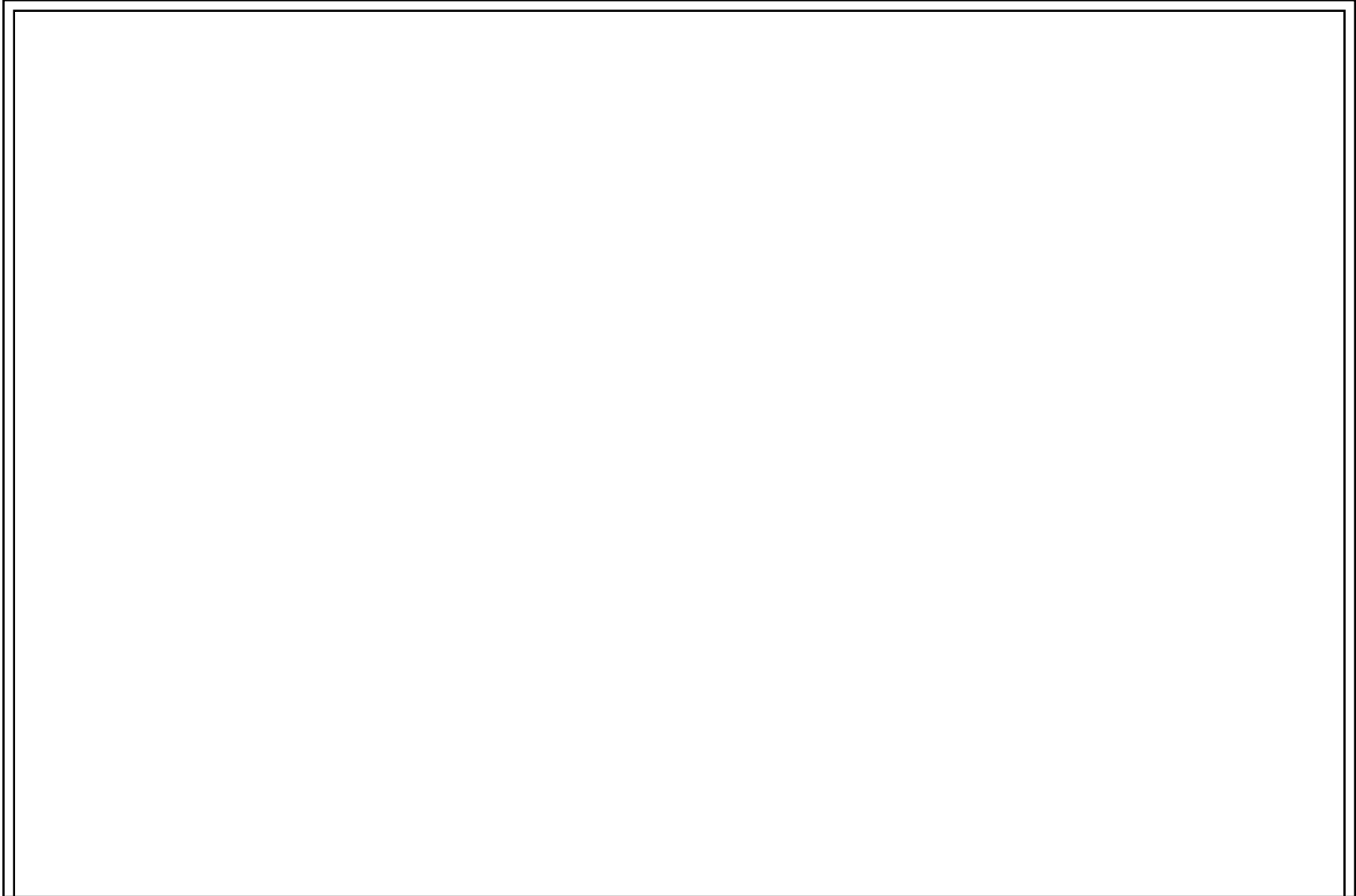


CHICAGO – When a handsome studmuffin meets a fetching, fabulously hot doctor, what’s the outcome? That’s right, sex without a relationship, AKA Friends with Benefits. And a movie featuring Ashton Kutcher and Natalie Portman called “No Strings Attached.”

Directed by comedy veteran Ivan Reitman (“Ghostbusters”), No Strings has an unevenly funny execution, anchored by some decent comic performances by the pretty leads. In a swift and resolute fashion, it takes the predictable story and gives it some well-appointed starch.

Natalie Portman is Emma, presented to us in a flashback to her camp days as a 14-year old. She is being “seduced” by Adam (Ashton Kutcher) who is awkwardly trying to get over his parent’s divorce. They don’t meet again until several years later, as college kids at the University of Michigan. Emma decides to ask Adam to accompany her on a date. This encounter is memorable, but the couple go their separate ways.

Flash forward again to Los Angeles, where the pair meet again, this time in more adult circumstances. Emma is now a resident physician at a teaching hospital, and Adam is a production assistant on a “High School Musical Meets Glee” type of television series. A little of the same initial spark is exchanged, but Adam is involved with Vanessa (Ophelia Lovibond) and again the opportunity has seemed to pass in another chance meeting.





Let Us Be Lovers?: Natalie Portman (Emma) and Ashton Kutcher (Adam) in 'No Strings Attached'  
*Photo credit: Dale Robinette for © 2011 DW Studios, LLC*

That is until Vanessa separates from Adam to take up with his father (Kevin Kline), a foppish ex-sitcom star living off the fame of his big hit series, "Great Scott." This development puts Adam into a tailspin, and he ends up drunk and nude (who doesn't?) on the couch of Emma and her doctor roommates. This is where the first tryst takes place, and where Emma gets the idea that she and Adam will be Schtup Buddies. Where will they go from there?

This is not the type of film that will attempt to do anything new with a predictable outcome, but it certainly generated a fair amount of laughs. There were actually several sharp gutbusters in the flashback prologue, and the absurd TV sitcom that Adam works introduces itself in appropriate hilarious fashion. But the the story, by Elizabeth Meriwether and Michael Samonek, has to focus back on the arrangement between Adam and Emma, and somehow, even with brief nudity, it's not as interesting or funny.

Natalie Portman – who is co-starring in two currently released films with two different ex-cast members of "That '70s Show" – displays some nice comic energy as the 80-hour-a-week working doctor. It takes her and the coupling through some absurd elements of the arrangement (are they going to do it in a car? Oh my!), but her and Kutcher have some chemistry, even through the will-they-or-won't-they cliché of every romantic comedy in the past 100 years.

The supporting cast is underutilized, and larger than it needed to be. There are several friendships in both Adam and Emma's places of employment, and the anticipation – for example – of Mindy Kaling from "The Office" trading some witticisms with the main players is reduced to about six lines. Kevin Kline has become a prime up-stage player in his later career, chewing scenery like a wily old scene stealer. The rapper Ludacris plays a wise-cracking bartender whose line readings sounded like he was using a TelePrompTer.

But the heart of this matter is in Kutcher and Portman, and judging from the cooing, sighing and applause from the audience in attendance they are a successful cinematic pairing. I can actually imagine other circumstantial movie pairings down the line, ala Tracy and Hepburn, of course minus the substance.





Paging Dr. Love: Natalie Portman takes advice from Greta Gerwig (Patrice) in 'No Strings Attached'  
Photo credit: Dale Robinette for © 2011 DW Studios, LLC

With Valentine's Day around the corner, No Strings Attached gets out of the gate early and may even win the battle in the expected tournament of romantic films. It has a funny sensibility and even manages a few highly swooning lines from the lovely and youngish (but watch out for the close-ups) Mr. Demi Moore.

And in the expectation of true love, it is always the early part of the relationship that yields the most heat. As a comedy, No Strings Attached fans this flame, it will be up the observer as to how close they will get to it and how warm they will become.

*"No Strings Attached" opens everywhere January 21st. Featuring Natalie Portman, Ashton Kutcher, Kevin Kline, Greta Gerwig, Cary Elwes, Olivia Thurby, Ludracis and Mindy Kaling. Screenplay/story by Elizabeth Meriwether and Michael Samonek and directed by Ivan Reitman. Rated "R"*



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