

Mila Kunis, Justin Timberlake Try ‘Friends With Benefits’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on July 22, 2011 - 12:09am

- [Andy Sandberg](#) [2]
- [Castle Rock](#) [3]
- [Emma Stone](#) [4]
- [Friends with Benefits](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [Jenna Elfman](#) [7]
- [Justin Timberlake](#) [8]
- [Mila Kunis](#) [9]
- [Movie Review](#) [10]
- [Patricia Clarkson](#) [11]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [12]
- [Richard Jenkins](#) [13]
- [Screen Gems](#) [14]
- [Woody Harrelson](#) [15]

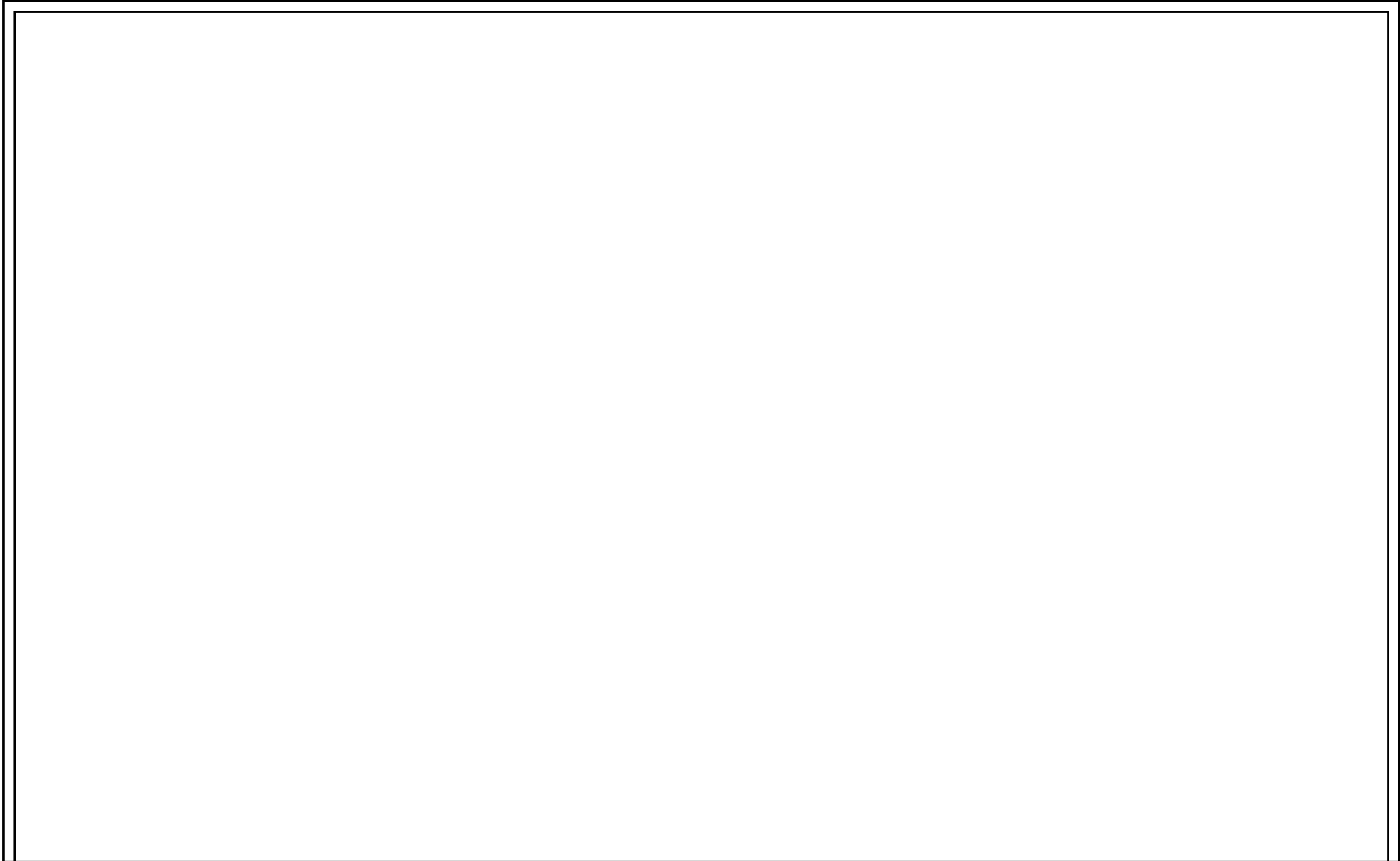


CHICAGO – It seems that carnal canoodling without strings attached seems all the rage in romantic comedies these days. The twentysomething set, having seen their share of divorces and break-ups, prefer the Justin Timberlake and Mila Kunis method in “Friends with Benefits.”

Set in the upper middle class fantasy realm, where a person can have a fabulous job in the publishing industry (note to Hollywood, that level of job is dead), this film relies on the charm and chemistry of the two leads, Timberlake and Kunis. The problem is the script and characterizations, because for a story to make fun of the typical rom-com movie clichés, and then blithely practice those same stereotypes, takes some brass.

Justin Timberlake is Dylan, a hot-shot Los Angeles art director at a popular website (at first I thought he was reprising his role in “Social Network). He is recruited by a hot-shot New York City headhunter named Jamie (Mila Kunis) to be art director at GQ Magazine. She convinces him to take the offer to come to NYC, against his better judgment. She also turns out to be one of his first friends in the big city, and they start to hang out together.

While watching a typical Hollywood romantic comedy, Dylan and Jamie start to complain about their love lives, how complicated relationships are. They make a pact, to begin having sex without the messy relationship, which in movieland turns out to be the best ever, rather than empty. It is obvious that a relationship is developing, spurred on by Dylan’s friend at GQ, a gay sports editor named Tommy (Woody Harrelson).





Flash Mobbing: Dylan (Justin Timberlake) and Jamie (Mila Kunis) in 'Friends with Benefits'
Photo credit: Glen Walker for Screen Gems

When the 4th of July weekend comes up, Jamie is stood up for a getaway with her mother Lorna (Patricia Clarkson), and Dylan steps in for an invitation to his family's home. His father (Richard Jenkins) is in the first stages of Alzheimer's Disease, and his sister Annie (Jenna Elfman) tries to hold it all together. It is during the trip that Jamie learns Dylan's true feelings, and that leads to a break-up of their pact. What happens next, it seems to me we've heard that song before.

The film rises and falls on the charisma of Timberlake and Kunis, and there is plenty to go around. Timberlake is becoming a very poised performer, comfortable with virtually everything the frenetic script throws at him. Kunis is even more impressive, literally corralling the story, and making her strange character quite believable. She is especially good in her scenes with Clarkson, who as written was destined to steal any screen time.

It is the situations and scenarios that are problematic. How does Kunis, for example, seal the deal for Timberlake moving to New York City? She shows him a flash mob doing a choreographed dance to a New York, New York song mash-up in Times Square. Hey screenwriters, 2009 called, they want their trend back. And when I think of Times Square in "Taxi Driver" (for example), and then I see the same locale in Friends with Benefits, I frankly don't know if either is normal.

What's really distressing is the way the film goes after romantic comedies. The two leads are so ready (and so-called hip enough) to disrespect the fake rom-com within the film (starring TV hotties Jason Segel and Rashida Jones), but they collapse to the same clichés within their own cinematic romance. Could that be the point, could it be some sort of meta-movie? I say no. There was just too many examples of hackneyed screenwriter dribble.

Woody Harrelson's "gay" character Tommy is borderline offensive. He is constantly shouting how gay and horny he is, but he doesn't do anything about it, keeping him "safe" and "passive" for a mass audience. The bars he takes Justin to, for example, are "mixed" so don't worry, the hunky JT can hook up. Mixed, he says? There might be some surprises later in the evening. Oh, and Tommy has a boat he uses to commute from Jersey to Manhattan. That becomes a heroic scene later involving Dylan's semi-senile father.



Sea Men: Dad (Richard Jenkins), Tommy (Woody Harrelson) and Justin Timberlake in ‘Friends with Benefits’
Photo credit: Glen Walker for Screen Gems

Speaking of which, why bring Alzheimer’s into the mix? To give Timberlake’s character sympathy? It was exploitative. And I love Richard Jenkins (“Six Feet Under”) the actor, he gives the Dad character an old college try, but as written he was given nothing but inappropriateness when necessary. It was also weird to see Dharma (Jenna Elfman) in a domestic role as JT’s sister, with her prepubescent son an amateur magician. Yep, that’s where the screenplay went, written by Keith Merryman, David A. Newman and director Will Gluck (who helmed last year’s lame “Easy A”).

There is forgiveness for this one, because the leads are good and everyone is trying so damn hard. But really, let’s try to convince ourselves to explore some real human relationships in movies at the beginning of the new century, not some same-old-same-old romantic comedy BS, pretending they’re something that they’re not.

“Friends with Benefits” opens everywhere on July 22th. Featuring Justin Timberlake, Mila Kunis, Patricia Clarkson, Jenna Elfman, Emma Stone, Andy Sandberg, Richard Jenkins, Jason Segel, Rashida Jones and Woody Harrelson. Screenplay by Keith Merryman, David A. Newman and Will Gluck, directed by William Gluck. Rated “R”



[16]

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