

The Dog Days of Diane Keaton in 'Darling Companion'

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – “If you want a friend in Washington,” Harry S Truman once said, “get a dog.” The same can be said for the film industry, as they keep producing canine quandaries. Diane Keaton, Kevin Kline, Sam Shepard and Elisabeth Moss cozy up to their own ‘Darling Companion.’

This is about folks of a certain age who are contemplating some of their own mortality, and what prompts such action is a person’s best friend, a mutt named Freeway. The film is unusually paced, almost leisurely so, and the cast is all-around excellent, no doubt dog lovers all. Diane Keaton still has the power to shoulder a film, and old pros Dianne Wiest, Richard Jenkins and Kevin Kline also get to sink their teeth into a film that’s about losing that dog, but never allowing it to sink into cloying sentiment. Pets become one of our most treasured relationships, and their unconditional love teaches us a few lessons in human relations, as the film illustrates.

Beth (Diane Keaton) and her graduate student daughter Grace (Elisabeth Moss) come upon a injured dog on the side of a freeway. They take a risk and bring it to a veterinarian named Sam (Jay Ali), and he brings the pooch back to health. Beth decides to keep the dog – much to the consternation of her husband Joseph (Kevin Kline) – and Sam also starts to date Grace. A year later, the couple becomes engaged (so far, if the dog wasn’t involved, this would be the plot to “The Five-Year Engagement”). Freeway, as they now have named the dog, has become so entrenched in the family he participates in the wedding ceremony.



Diane Keaton (Beth) and Elisabeth Moss do a Freeway Rescue in 'Darling Companion'
Photo credit: Wilson Webb for Sony Pictures Classics

All the guests staying are staying at Utah mountain lodge where the wedding took place, including Joseph's sister Penny (Dianne Wiest), her boyfriend Russell (Richard Jenkins) and her son Bryan (Mark Duplass). The happiness of the weekend dissipates when Freeway runs away, putting into motion a search effort that will involve the lodge manager named Carmen (Ayelet Zurer), a woman with a gypsy heritage who can sense where Freeway might be, and the local law enforcement through Sheriff Morris (Sam Shepard). As the family searches for the dog, they also confront certain life issues that desire resolution.

There is a nice sense of urgency and reality within the dog tale that "wags" itself. The story unfolds naturally, and although the lost dog might be serving as a metaphor, it still creates suspense around the other issues that start to happen. This is a premise that could easily unravel, and there are parts that are a bit over-the-top, but the bottom line is the fine cast delivers the story with a sincerity and effort that uplifts the material.

It says a lot that the film industry has room to keep giving Diane Keaton lead roles, both for challenging the demographic expectations of filmgoers, and for Keaton herself. She is marvelous in this film, asked to walk from fretful distress over her lost canine companion, and to face up to her longtime human companion, her husband Joseph. Both her and Kevin Kline has good chemistry for the type of couple they're playing, newly minted empty-nesters wondering all of a sudden why they wake up next to the other person.

Dianne Wiest and Richard Jenkins are also fun as a sexually charged older couple. Now this type of "humorous" situation has been exploited before, but there is a subtlety to how it becomes important in contrast to the Keaton/Kline couple and the potential coupling of Bryan with the lodge manager. The younger actors don't have as much going for them in the story as the older ones and their performances are a bit weaker because of that – the gypsy stuff comes off more annoying than mystical.



Kevin Kline (Joseph) is Naturally Skeptical in 'Darling Companion'
Photo credit: Wilson Webb for Sony Pictures Classics

This also features playwright/actor Sam Shepard, virtually unrecognizable as the town sheriff, and is co-written and directed by old pro Lawrence Kasdan ("Body Heat," "Silverado" and "Mumford," among others). This is definitely a fable for the current time in the older character's lives, much as Kasdan's "The Big Chill" served the same purpose for that cast. If there is one catch, it's the upper middle class fantasy elements, but that's probably the types that Kasdan knows best.

Is the dog found again? Well, that answer is important, but what becomes more prevalent is the question – does it matter to the characters? The same inner light that would keep seven people searching for a lost dog, also has the radiance to cure some relationship ills, if only when practicing the same unconditional love.

"Darling Companion" continues its release on April 27th in Chicago. Check local listings for theaters and showtimes. Featuring Diane Keaton, Kevin Kline, Dianne Wiest, Richard Jenkins, Elizabeth Moss, Sam Shepard, Mark Duplass, Ayelet Zurer and Kasey as Freeway. Screenplay by Lawrence Kasdan and Meg Kasdan. Directed by Lawrence Kasdan. Rated "PG-13"



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