What to Stream: Ernst Lubitsch's Most Underrated Sex Comedy

Filmed in 1940, under the censorious Hays Code, "That Uncertain Feeling" nonetheless gets away with flagrantly inventive erotic allusions.

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A little ignorance is useful for developing one's own ideas. Around thirty years ago, I sought out a VHS of Ernst Lubitsch's "That Uncertain Feeling" (1941) to fill in a blank in my viewing of his seminal Hollywood sex comedies. Unaware that it was widely dismissed as one of his weakest films, I instantly became obsessed with it, and I still consider it his starkest, purest, wildest masterpiece. "That Uncertain Feeling" is newly streaming on the Criterion Channel this month, and with its ready availability I propose an illuminating cinematic challenge: compare this movie, which was shot in 1940, under the censorious regime of the Hays Code, with any of Lubitsch's pre-Code comedies and see in which he gets away with more flagrantly erotic allusions and more brazen assertions of sexual freedom.

"That Uncertain Feeling" is the story of a young, rich, and childless Park Avenue couple, Jill and Larry Baker (Merle

Oberon and Melvyn Douglas). They are prominently featured in a glossy magazine as "the happy Bakers," but their happiness is revealed to be an empty façade. Jill is suffering from a long-term case of hiccups that her high-society friends suggest can be cured only by the ministrations of their circle's psychoanalyst of choice, Dr. Vengard (Alan Mowbray). Jill resists, claiming to be "normal." Aware of the propensity of analysis to drive married couples apart, through the relentless force of its revelations, yet desperate for a cure, she soon consults him. But, once in his office, she admits that she has trouble displaying her symptoms to doctors because, she says, "When I come, it goes, and when I go, it comes." (It's astounding to realize what the censors weren't thinking.)

Delivered a mere few minutes into the movie, this medical confession sets the outrageous tone of sexual frustration that ricochets throughout the film—and the thick layers of social graces and material comforts that conceal it. In wry dialogue, Vengard coaxes from Jill—who admits to (or claims to) be twenty-four—that she also suffers from sleepless nights in bed beside her husband, a busy thirty-five-year-old insurance executive who sleeps soundly beside her. Armed with the insight, Jill tries and fails to rouse him from his slumbers (a sly and symbolic stratagem, involving the family dog). That's where adultery comes to the rescue, in the person of another of Vengard's patients, Alexander Sebastian (Burgess Meredith), an intellectually cantankerous and ludicrously misanthropic pianist-

composer whose attentions to Jill suddenly fill her days with cultural sophistications as well as with the frenzy of new romance. Larry's discovery of their affair—in an astounding bit of business involving mistaken identity—leads him to seek a divorce, quickly and cleanly, in the hope of winning her back.

The framework of "That Uncertain Feeling" is based on a silent film of Lubitsch's, "Kiss Me Again," from 1925, which in turn is based on a nineteenth-century French farce, "Divorçons!" ("Let's Divorce!") (The earlier film, long considered lost, was received favorably at the time of its release, including in the pages of the brand new *New Yorker*.) Working with a script by Donald Ogden Stewart—and working as his own producer, making the one and only film that was issued by his own production company—Lubitsch gives the impression of unleashing a series of inspired gags that he'd been saving up for his own account. "That Uncertain Feeling" was made with a relatively low budget compared with the studio films he'd been making, and it relies on a small number of actors and settings. But within the sparely decorated sets Lubitsch pulls off exquisitely timed and wickedly allusive maneuvers of desire and power. This is all the more impressive given the film's sense of relaxation, its warm and humane rounding of the hard lines of his precise mechanisms—not least by way of the actors' lively expressivity, which is perched lightly on the sharp edge of anger, pain, and conflict.

In fervently discerning closeups, Lubitsch catches Oberon's

flickering glances, Douglas's curdling smiles of bonhomie, Meredith's febrile angularity. Even Larry's breezy stride into the Bakers' living room while Jill is chatting there with a friend, or his similarly confident steps through the same room when he's unaware of Sebastian's dour presence there, evoke his distractedness and its underlying cause—business. The rich and successful Larry, whom his lawyer, Jones (Harry Davenport), calls the best salesman in the industry, has insurance on the brain in place of romance. His most engaged physical involvement with Jill involves poking her playfully in the midriff and squeaking "Keeks!" (After a session with Vengard, she has something to say about this.) Larry's most energetic interaction with Jill involves the planning for a dinner at their home for some potential clients, furniture manufacturers who happen to be Hungarian (and happen to have the resonant names of Kafka and Janáček). He trains her to pronounce the hearty Hungarian exhortation "Egészségedre" ("To your health") and encourages her to do so with a wind-up doll's perky blankness, suggesting just how impersonally he has come to see her after a mere six years of marriage.

Yet Sebastian, the new amour, is no paragon of virtue or charm. Boastfully antisocial and willfully unconventional, his own neurosis—performance anxiety that, he says, involves the concert hall—likely involves something more intimate, as suggested by the phallic implications of a flaccid, downward-drooping squiggle that Jill notices in a surrealistic portrait of him by an artist ex. A fussy aesthete

and a shameless guest, Sebastian demands that a vase in the Baker home be taken off a table and hidden in a drawer. Hostile to the Hungarian instrumental record that Larry plays for his guests, he presumes to scratch it. Put off by the appearance of a female guest at the side of his piano, he orders her removed before he performs. His habitual epithet is "Phooey!" Yet for all his antic hostility, Sebastian at least gives Jill the impression that he's paying attention to her. (What happens when their affair passes over into cohabitation—another matter of shockingly bold comedy for the time—is another story altogether.)

Lubitsch stages scenes—such as Sebastian's post-prandial living-room piano concert for Larry's Hungarian prospects—with an extraordinary theatrical sense of gesture (pan shots of characters crossing the room, meaningfully complex exchanges of glances) and a totemic sense of objects (a lock, a cabinet, a record, a vase). In so doing, he reveals the ordinary run of sociable actions to have mighty psychological reverberations. Despite the comedic view of the patient-analyst relationship, "That Uncertain Feeling" is no spoof on psychoanalysis. Rather, Lubitsch's symbolic representation of hidden desires, unexpressed motives, and deflected attentions—the cold cinematic embodiment of ineffable, roiling passions—plays like psychoanalysis in images. His view of the power of analysis extends to the most pressing of current events, too—to the analysis of power. Born to a Jewish family in Berlin, Lubitsch launched his career in Germany before going to

Hollywood, in the early nineteen-twenties, and in “That Uncertain Feeling” he also made allusions to the looming menace of Nazi Germany, including in one sequence involving the Hitler salute, which hints at the sexual pathology underlying his tyranny.

Because he filmed “That Uncertain Feeling” on a low budget, Lubitsch didn’t rely on the opulence (or the sentiment) of his previous, celebrated duo of films, “Ninotchka” and “The Shop Around the Corner,” or on the Eurocentric glitter of “Trouble in Paradise” or his four features with Maurice Chevalier. Rather, he pared down and melted away much of his cinematic superstructure to reveal the mechanisms of his method and its underlying erotic ideas with an extraordinary, self-revealing clarity. Peculiarly, “That Uncertain Feeling,” released in April, 1941, was reviewed in the *Times* on May 2nd, in a relatively brief piece that’s overshadowed by a longer review, on the same page, of another new release: “Citizen Kane.” No one doubts the cinematic modernity of Orson Welles’s flamboyantly expressive first feature. Yet Lubitsch’s art of allusions and indirections is no less enduringly inspiring. One can see an essentially Lubitschian element in the work of such modern filmmakers as Wes Anderson and Sofia Coppola, with their attention to the truths and illusions of exquisite subtleties, or in that of Abbas Kiarostami and Jia Zhangke, whose political circumstances have required the symbolic expression of what can’t be addressed openly. In the present age of bold directness, Lubitsch’s sense of

understatement and metaphor reflects the impossibility of self-knowledge and the inadequacy of self-expression. The giddy artifice of his aesthetic shudders with the troubling uncertainties of rock-bottom reality.

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