

Love lost

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [November 29, 2005](#) issue



In the movies, romances fail for reasons of class, money, scandal, race, death, noble sacrifice or—more recently—fear of commitment. ***Shopgirl*** may be the first Hollywood love story in a long time to revolve around the inability to love.

The shopgirl of the title is Mirabelle Buttersfield, played by the talented Clare Danes, who has been waiting years for such a juicy role. Mirabelle sells expensive gloves at Saks Fifth Avenue in a fancy section of Los Angeles. She spends her days staring at the world going by and wondering what life has in store; she spends her nights feeding her cat and figuring out how to pay off her student loans.

While waiting for an epiphany, she begins an on-again, off-again relationship with sweet but goofy Jeremy (Jason Schwartzman from *Rushmore*), who sells amplifiers and designs logos for rock bands. Jeremy's idea of a date is to sit outside a fancy nightclub and stare at their neon signs.

Then Ray Porter (Steve Martin) enters her life. He's a successful 50-year-old businessman who buys a pair of gloves from Mirabelle one day and sends them to her as a gift the next, along with an invitation to dinner. Despite knowing next to nothing about this mysterious man, except that he has impeccable taste, Mirabelle says yes, and so begins their seemingly uneven romance.

The early drama rests on their contrasting expectations for the relationship. Mirabelle sees the dating period (complete with sex) as the courting stage of a long-term commitment. Ray views it as a temporary thing until something more permanent comes along. Ray is kind and generous, giving Mirabelle expensive gifts

on a regular basis, but he seems unwilling or unable to look into the soul of the gentle woman he has wooed.

We learn a few important things about Mirabelle between their get-togethers. She is a skilled visual artist who lacks confidence, takes prescription drugs for depression, and has a father back in Vermont who has barely spoken since serving in Vietnam decades earlier.

These character bits are revealed with grace and care by director Anand Tucker (*Hilary and Jackie*). The understated script by Martin (based on his 2000 novella) is able to balance a humorous subplot involving Jeremy's attempts to learn about women by listening to self-help tapes while on the road with a rock band.

We wonder if Ray will come to his senses and realize what he has in Mirabelle—until it becomes clear that though Ray is not a cad or a creep, he is incapable of loving anyone the way Mirabelle needs to be loved. This realization not only puts a melancholy spin on the story but forces us to question just what it means to be “able to love.”

Shopgirl is reminiscent of European art cinema, especially the films of French director Eric Rohmer, whose “Moral Tales” and “Comedies and Proverbs” (*My Night at Maud's*, *Pauline at the Beach*) remain the benchmark for films about human frailty. One of the Rohmer-like methods that Martin employs is allowing Mirabelle to open up completely to her older lover, only to have him sabotage the relationship. These acts seem to be unintentional and unconscious, which makes Ray's problem seem all the more serious.

Perhaps underestimating the actors' ability to deliver, the film inserts an expository scene with Ray's psychiatrist and some voice-overs from the book to clarify aspects of Ray's dilemma—explaining things that we already understand from the looks, pauses and reaction shots of the skilled performers. Except for these few bumps in the road, *Shopgirl* is a skilled and moving tale of one man's inability to offer or accept love. Compared to the stories Hollywood normally churns out, it feels downright profound.