

Racial divide

By [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [March 7, 2006](#) issue



Classic romantic comedies follow this scenario: the hero and heroine begin as adversaries but are irresistibly drawn to each other; they overcome a series of obstacles and recognize that they belong together; their willingness to change—to discard the prejudices that kept them apart—denotes their growth as human beings and shows that they deserve each other.

The best recent film example of a classic romantic comedy is the enchanting remake of *Pride and Prejudice* with Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Bennett and Matthew Macfadyen as Mr. D'Arcy. For an interesting variation on the formula, check out *Something New*, in which the barrier that the protagonists, Kenya (Sanaa Lathan) and Brian (Simon Baker), have to negotiate is race: she's black and he's white.

In most of the romantic comedies Hollywood turned out in the 1930s, the heroine is an heiress and the hero a man of the people—if not working-class, then a down-to-earth professional. *Something New* plays with that part of the formula. Kenya is from an academic family; her family attends the major event in Los Angeles African-American high society, the Pacific Cotillion, and she's being considered for partner in a big accounting firm. Brian, on the other hand, is a landscape gardener whom she's employed to transform the overgrown backyard of her new house.

The reverse-racist set-up is witty: Kenya's family looks down on Brian. Her brother (Donald Faison) refers to him as "the help" and introduces her to his mentor, a hunky black lawyer (Blair Underwood) whom her parents and her girlfriends regard as a preferable sort. But Kriss Turner's script hedges its bets on the class issue by

making Brian a college-educated gardener who tried, and rejected, a career as an ad man.

The real problem Kenya's family and friends have with Brian is that he's white. They find her feelings for him baffling, and so does she. At first she won't consider him as a suitor; when they meet at a Starbucks on a blind date, she's so uncomfortable that she goes out of her way to chit-chat with other African Americans. She's reluctant to hire him to landscape her yard after circumstances have thrown them together, but he's so talented she can't say no. Then he's always around, encouraging her repressed vivacious side. Her resistance to him wears away, but she always seems to be looking for reasons to turn him down.

The movie is about how she overcomes her preconceptions and learns to trust her instincts. What makes it an unusual hybrid of a romantic comedy and a social-problem picture is that it's focused entirely on Kenya's interior battle over how she wants to define herself—in the racial terms she's always accepted or in the broader humanistic ones that would allow her to share her life with a white man.

The film isn't really about Brian, though the chemistry between Lathan and Baker is so strong, and they're both so likable, that it may not be immediately apparent that he is a secondary character. He doesn't experience any struggle, he doesn't have to grow, and the story is told entirely from her point of view. The structural inequity of the two characters may make *Something New* problematic as a romantic comedy, but it's Kenya's struggle that makes it a resonant contemporary romance, and a daring one for a black filmmaker (Sanaa Hamri) to concoct for African-American audiences.

There are many things wrong with the film. Some are small—such as the fact that Kenya's womanizing brother is so goofy you can't believe he got through law school. Some are large—such as the way that, in the end, Kenya's friends and family simply fall in line to approve her choice of partner. But it has a satisfying quota of charm and glamour, and the element of race gives it a bracing sting.