

BY ELIZABETH M. TAMNY

The state of what's usually called the size-acceptance movement in this country hasn't felt very encouraging to me recently. *Radiance*, a key voice of the

big girls. The news isn't all bad.

What's more, some general changes have taken place in public thinking about body issues: about the fundamental inefficacy of dieting, about the institutionalized reasons why women have been

murky talk and attitudes about dieting and body size—as well as straight-up fat prejudice—has migrated over to the dead-end category of “healthy eating.” When the subject of *Oprah* is miraculous weight loss, she still leans heavily, sometimes hysterically, on the idea of fat equaling death, with an unconvincing and contradictory soupcon of size acceptance thrown in.

The point is that it's a very complicated land we now live in, one where Lane Bryant makes interesting, sexy clothes for large women but still refuses to use models over size 14. One where TV commercials for the weight-loss drug Meridia show plump women who are pretty, happy, active, have boyfriends—so what's the reason they need to lose weight again? One where the fat Eddie Murphy, not the thin one, gets the girl in *The Nutty Professor*, but not before the movie makes fun of his body for 96 straight minutes with special sound track cues for every puff, every thigh chafe, every

squeezing-into-a-too-small-chair. You hear a lot of you-go-girl surface-level body-acceptance talk these days, but eating disorders only grow—in number, in scope, in variety, in age range, further into the male as well as the female population.

My recent failed attempts to write a blistering, ironic-yet-inspiring anthem of size acceptance notwithstanding (it's tentatively titled “Carnie's Fissures”), something is clearly needed. And *Shallow Hal* is not it. Try as it might, *Shallow Hal* just doesn't get it, no matter what the Farrelly brothers, Jack Black, Gwyneth Paltrow, Gwyneth's fat body double Ivy Snitzer, *Entertainment Tonight*, E! Online, or a goodly portion of the movie-reviewing community might want us to think. The movie tries hard to do the right thing, but it's got a flawed premise and a lot of bad fat jokes getting in its way. It would be an interesting exercise if it weren't touted by the filmmakers as an apology for sensitive treatment of fat people. But ultimately it's frustrating and

maddening—and an accurate barometer of where we as a society seem to be on this issue.

The premise in *Shallow Hal* is that a superficial, somewhat unattractive man, Hal (Black), is forced to abandon his continually unsuccessful pursuit of gorgeous women when a spell is put on him by personal-growth infomercial king Anthony Robbins (in what is, frankly, a darn well-acted cameo; he has a lot of the best lines). The spell dictates that from now on Hal can see only women's “inner beauty,” which appears to him in the guise of physical beauty. Enchanted Hal heads out and immediately finds himself infatuated with women whose great inner beauty makes them look to him like fashion models. To the rest of the world, and to Hal's best friend, Mauricio (Jason Alexander), they just look ugly.

Or, more to the point, fat. Because fat, according to *Shallow Hal*, is the same thing as ugly—a primary exasperating assumption that those who have publicly defended the film don't seem to get or even mention. Hal does find a burn victim and two women with big noses beautiful, and he sees one beautiful young woman who's not so nice as a wrinkled old crone, but for most of this movie ugly means fat.

Anyone who's seen the trailers knows what happens next: Hal meets Rosemary (Paltrow), who is smart, kind, funny, and big (to the world, thin to him) and falls in love

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with her. Mauricio, disgusted with Hal's love of a woman with “cankles,” eventually reverses the spell. (Jason Alexander seems to be carving out something of a niche for himself playing best friends who siphon off some of the protagonists' worst characteristics so we won't hate them so much.) Once the spell is reversed, Hal hides from Rosemary, certain he'll be so repulsed by the sight of her that he won't love her anymore. But in the end he realizes the inner person is what's most important and seeks her out. Hal makes the requisite public declaration of love, the two ride off into the sunset (actually they're off to Rosemary's next Peace Corps assignment), and we get to satisfy

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16

## A Farrelly brothers movie with a radically healthy attitude toward large women? **Fat Chance**



movement, ceased publishing with its winter 2001 issue. *Mode*, which at least cautiously pushed the upper range of fashion models into size-18 territory, just folded. John Popper has become half a popper, and despite federal paper shuffling Honda still refuses to make seat belts that accommodate passengers larger than 215 pounds. We just finished eight straight years of fat jokes about a chubby (if that, when he was that) president. A few months ago a friend had weight-loss surgery.

But Camryn's still in there fighting, bless her heart, and her boss, David E. Kelley, is fighting harder than he used to: a recent episode of *Boston Public* debuted a “fat girl” club at the high school. The Padded Lilies, the San Francisco-based synchronized swimming team, were on Leno last year, and although the zines *Fat!So?* and *Zafiq!* seem to have gone under, they've spawned at least three books, two of them the first of their kind in dealing with fat sexuality. A character in this summer's Freddie Prinze Jr. film, *Summer Catch*, stands on a bar and comes out as a lover of

encouraged to dislike their bodies, about the effects of the media, about the extent of prejudice faced by fat people, about the possibility of living a healthy, fun life at a weight not on the insurance charts. Broader awareness of how the traditional, body-hating language of dieting at least *sounds* is starting to inform the mainstream media, to the point where Special K and Weight Watchers commercials—Weight Watchers, where not long ago women donned pig noses after bad weigh-ins—have started to sound downright nice. But underneath is a subtext of panic; companies' hands in the air, backpedaling, no, we never wanted you to hate your bodies, really, we can see why you might be mad since diets fail and we've been milking your pain and obsession for money and telling you to starve. They know people—women—aren't going to buy if the selling smells of the usual body hatred.

But companies are still out there selling their products, more than ever. And we're still supposed to be thin, more than ever. A lot of the

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# Culture

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our nine dollars' worth of curiosity about what Gwyneth looks like in a fat suit.

Despite some solid size-acceptance talk from Tony Robbins ("Aren't TV, movies, magazines what have him hypnotized, not me?"), the filmmakers go to ridiculous lengths to try to convince us that Hal and Mauricio's shallowness is unusual; in Hal's case, it's purported to be caused by the morphine-addled utterances of his dying father, who tells him "Never settle for routine poontang." Right. Fashion-magazine beauty standards are everywhere—in our thinking about other people, in our thinking about ourselves. Almost every male-seeking-female ad in the *Reader* wants "height-weight proportionate." But blaming Hal and Mauricio's superficiality on absurd Farrellian origins makes them easier to castigate, as well as letting the filmmakers off the hook for their *own* shallowness in a roundabout way. The casting is supposed to let them off the hook as well. Both Black and Alexander are stocky and not traditionally attractive (though I

think they're cute), so how can this movie be insulting? *They're* no knockouts, right?

Which, in some ways, is Hal's real offense, according to the film: he's aiming out of his league. He's shooting for women in a different looks category and can't see he'd have better luck if he didn't try for model types. *Shallow Hal* embraces an empirical, white, mainstream categorizing of physical beauty as the backdrop for its message about loving the whole person. It wouldn't work if Hal were a handsome man. Hal is shallow, but he's right to think that fat is ugly, goes the logic. Ugly is absolute, as is beauty. It's odd that the movie was originally titled "Eye of the Beholder," because in this movie what's considered beautiful is not at all subjective.

Evidence of "inner beauty" is just as rigid: Rosemary is in the Peace Corps, which is an automatic good-person thing. As is anything to do with hospitals, sick children, or sick relatives. Worst of all, the rule connecting inner and outer beauty in *Shallow Hal* is that never the twain shall meet. Pretty girls are not nice, Mauricio tells Hal. Some of the film's jokes lie in seeing gorgeous women act "like ugly women"—be nervous and eager and good listeners and not cold princesses. We see one

contradictory example, Hal's neighbor, who's supposed to be both good and beautiful; but the idea that really seems to drive this movie is that interesting, nice people are ugly and pretty people are mean. You can't ever have everything you want in one package.

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Hollywood's struggle with all this oversimplification—the resigned way in which the film chants "inner beauty is what's important" actually starts to sound like a grim compromise adult males are forced to make—would be a little bit easier if they could at least acknowledge that people are not always attracted

to the same things, not to mention that not every culture in America thinks fat is so bad. And for every physical attribute you can think of that might make you recoil—short legs, hairy pits, big noses, fat asses, cankles—there's a population into it and a Yahoo club for it. The world can be a harsh place, but what is beautiful—what makes our pulses race—is not remotely simple, even with all the pushy magazines and commonalities in preference out there. Statistically, in every group of ten twittering high school boys watching *Shallow Hal* there'll be at least one boy who's turned on by the sight of Rosemary's fat calves and not sure what to do about it.

It's interesting that in this film built around fear of a fat body, we don't actually see much of one. Neither the fat Rosemary nor the other fat woman Hal finds attractive gets much screen time. The film lingers lovingly on Gwyneth Paltrow's body and face, but it peers cautiously at Ivy Snitzer's; we see blocked views of bits and pieces of her (a fat arm, a calf) and her whole body in a quick medium/long shot, usually. The fat-suit Gwyneth has to be on-screen longer for plot purposes at the end, but her total fat-suit time is maybe ten minutes. (Even the publicity stills only show the thin

Gwyneth.) Maybe this is as much fat as the Farrellys think we can handle. I mean, if they really were comfortable making a movie with a fat girl in it, they would have done that.

And yeah, the fat jokes are bad. Watching them reminded me of something Dave Chappelle once said in a routine about a southern restaurant owner automatically offering him fried chicken: "Have you ever had something happen that was so racist that you didn't even get mad? You were just like, 'Goddamn that was . . . racist!'" That's how I felt watching this film. The fat jokes, which are one of the main complaints of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance against this film, are so bad that I didn't even get mad. Rosemary's seat breaks under her, which is supposed to be funny. And what is *up* with Hollywood's thing about big-girl underwear? Do they think fat girls' underwear is engineered differently? Or that fat women's twats are so huge and devouring (I don't care how pretentious it is to call up the vagina dentata in a piece on a Farrelly brothers film) that only enormous flaps of fabric will cover them? Do they have any idea what a 300-pound woman is actually like?

Obviously not, if she's bending steel chairs with her girth. OK, maybe the fat jokes did make me mad.

Rosemary also eats constantly and in huge portions, in a big ol' fat joke way, in a way a fat person actually wouldn't. In one joke she cuts a third of a whole cake as a snack in front of Hal's coworkers. The public unstoppable eater is the same species of stereotype as that grinning fat person of commercials who is always obliviously taking up more than his share of an airline seat, squashing his poor seatmates. Or the sexually rapacious fat woman who hurls herself at a defenseless man on the dance floor. When I see those commercials I always want to say: Don't worry—fat people are often *ashamed*, OK? Prejudice has made sure of that. Ashamed, not happy, to be taking up more than their designated amount of space, mortified about their needs, their bodies' demands, their hungers of all kinds. Unless they've come to a point where they've accepted their size and are consequently *mad* airplane seats are so small, in which

case they move the seat arm up and ask the flight attendant for a seat belt extender with a polite smile. (I always find that works well.)

Although she is (perhaps unrealistically) confident in every other way, Rosemary embodies the worst of stereotypes when it comes to her fatness. In their attempts at sensitivity, the Farrelly brothers have made her embarrassed of her body without acknowledging there's any other way to be. Rosemary is unconnected to her body in a way typical of fat-suited characters in movies: they stumble around in ill-fitting clothes, bumping into things, unsure of where their bodies end. A speech Rosemary gives on her plight as a fat girl, as well as her genuinely sweet personality, are designed to make us sympathize with her, but the fat jokes work at cross-purposes. Rosemary's dislike of her body is supposed to let those fat jokes off the hook. The ending—when Mauricio admits he's afraid of women and Hal admits how shallow he is, and when Hal chooses fat Rosemary—is what's supposed to redeem this film, fat

jokes and flawed premise and all.

Despite the loving-the-inner-person crap, Rosemary's feelings about herself are as far as Hal or the film gets in its thinking about fatness. Clearly, according to *Shallow Hal*, fat is ugly, and clearly *being* fat sucks. (Of course, being fat *would* suck if you had to spend three hours in makeup encasing yourself in a rubbery manufactured fat suit to be that way. Not to mention that the fat suit they put Gwyneth in is way unattractive—she doesn't look like any fat person I know.) I'd be the last person to say that being fat in America is easy, and a lot of fat women really do hate how they look and are disconnected from their bodies. Being a *woman* in America, period, isn't easy; nobody here gets out without some scars from the body wars, fat people more than most.

But fat people are also assertive creatures with a capacity for happiness who carve out whole, juicy lives for themselves where people know what they look like and might even like it. There are a lot of

fat people among the 55 percent of the American population considered "overweight" who don't like how they look and whose feelings help make a film like *Shallow Hal* work; but there are a lot who do like how they look, and the movie doesn't even acknowledge that possibility. For all its good intentions the film is content to keep fat people the "other"—sad, pitiable, weird, a Farrelly brothers joke. Why don't the people defending this film see that it's offensive to be told that no one will ever like you unless they are tricked into seeing past your appearance?

Seeing someone be tricked into seeing past his own prejudices is an engaging conceit in the abstract. Watching Hal being forced into acting against his will is interesting, as is following the ways in which the script plays with the premise, although I don't think it explores the possibilities fully enough—why doesn't Hal see *himself* through the inner-beauty filter? But in the end the lingering taste of this movie for me was sad. Sad because when Hal

defends and supports and is nice to Rosemary it's fake. Sad because the ending doesn't make up for the fake niceness—ten minutes of fat Gwyneth before sending Hal and Rosemary off into geographic oblivion. You get the feeling the movie mops itself into an ideological corner.

With its thin version of a fat heroine and two-second glimpses of fat body parts, *Shallow Hal* is about as close as we want to get to the life of a fat person for now. We are a country that sees size in terms of diets and fat suits. We like tricks. We like drama. We like grand plans for change, telescoping time, spells and fixes and crystal balls. We like it in the movies and we crave it in a reality where few people, fat or thin, are happy with their bodies and what they really look like right now, every day. It's a snapshot of murky, compromised, midlevel cultural progress to see the hero of a movie drive off with a "fat woman" at the end. But I'd rather see movies with real fat people in them, about real fat people. ■