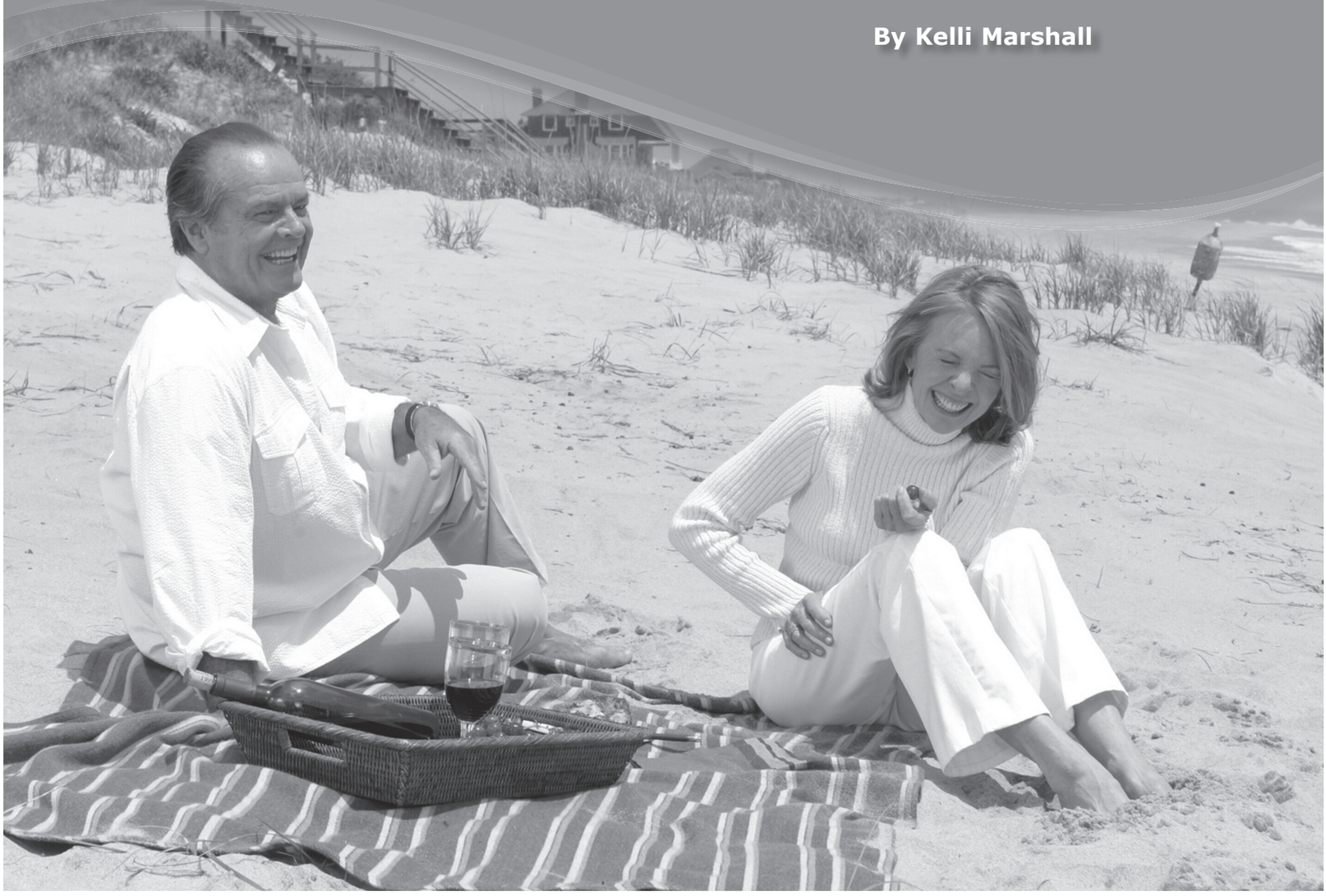
Something's Gotta Give and the Classical Screwball Comedy

By Kelli Marshall



Harry (Jack Nicholson) and Erica (Diane Keaton) surrounded by lush beach houses and wearing clothing to match in *Something's Gotta Give* (2003). *Photo courtesy of Photofest.*

Abstract: Nancy Meyers's *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) may have succeeded both critically and financially because it imitates the central conventions, characterization, and narrative structure of classical screwball comedies. Like its screwball predecessors, *Something's Gotta Give* presents a comparatively complex view of love and romance, which is represented by slapstick humor, verbal sparring, and characters who function both actively and passively. In addition, the film's creators pay careful attention to casting and the distinct character types and the narrative framework of the *commitment comedy*, a subgenre of the screwball comedy. Consequently, *Something's Gotta Give*, like the screwball comedies of the 1930s and '40s (and unlike most current romance films), appeals to a wide target audience, not just women.

Keywords: Diane Keaton, Nancy Meyers, Jack Nicholson, screwball comedy, *Something's Gotta Give*

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In her article "Is This as Good as It Gets?" film critic Stephanie Zacharek claims that the state of the contemporary romantic comedy is bordering on desperation. Beginning with Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks in *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and working her way to Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts in *Notting Hill* (1999), Zacharek argues that romantic comedies have become nothing if not "dismal," "lame," "transparent," and "ineffably stupid"; perhaps most unfortunate, they feature couples that have no spark. To amend the status of the genre, Zacharek urges today's directors to take some notes from the screwball comedies of the 1930s and '40s—films that, compared to their contemporary counterparts, are more complicated in their views of love, more open to risk and adventure, and more carefully cast. Moreover, whereas today's romantic comedies primarily target a female audience, the early screwball films were created, Zacharek reminds us, for both men and women; one only needed "to be human to be interested in them."

Significantly, these four characteristics of screwball comedies, which Zacharek prescribes for Hollywood's ailing romance genre, are almost exactly what we find in Nancy Meyers's *Something's Gotta Give* (2003), a comedy about two middle-aged people who find love (and lots of sex) in the autumn of their lives. First, *Something's Gotta Give*, like early screwball films, is complex in its treatment of heterosexual love. Whereas the central relationship in contemporary romantic comedies generally hinges one-dimensionally on sentimentality, the relationship in Meyers's film simultaneously offers biting wit, silly farce, and unexpected poignancy. Second, its inclusion of middle-aged nudity and its unusual focus on a late-in-life romance (as opposed to the usual fling between two thirtysomethings) make *Something's Gotta Give* a risky venture. Third, writer-director Meyers made careful casting choices: she knew that she wanted Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton for the lead roles and pitched the film to both stars before she began writing the screenplay (Griffin). Consequently, the characters in *Something's Gotta Give* are tailor-made for the acting styles of Keaton and Nicholson. Finally, like the screwball comedies of the 1930s and '40s, *Something's Gotta Give*, which was both critically and financially successful, evidently appealed to a variety of people, not just the presumed target audience of middle-aged women.[1]

These are not the only ways, however, that *Something's Gotta Give* imitates the tradition of the classical screwball comedy. In fact, there are at least six other conventions of this genre that are upheld in Meyers's film: elite settings, romantic getaways, slapstick humor, verbal sparring, a plot that hinges on marriage, and lead characters who function both actively and passively. In addition to these central conventions, *Something's Gotta Give* preserves both the characterization and narrative structure of the classical screwball genre. Specifically, the film may be positioned as a *commitment comedy*, a subgenre of the screwball genre that contains five specific character types as well as a distinct narrative framework. This article will focus on three aspects of the screwball comedy—its central conventions, characterization, and narrative structure—with regard to *Something's Gotta Give*.

Situating the Screwball Comedy

Film scholars have differing opinions about what constitutes a screwball comedy; some lump screwball with romantic comedy, while others, such as Wes D. Gehring, take great pains to distinguish the two.[2] The romantic comedy, according to Gehring, generally puts forth the following central conventions: melodramatic story lines in which pain and/or suffering might be a true threat (e.g., the crippling at the end of Leo McCarey's 1939 *Love Affair*); serious and somewhat passive heroines who become involved with (traditionally) more active males; and narratives that drag out to "a turtle's pace," so that their audiences can agonize with the onscreen couple about whether the two will end up together (*Romantic* 3).

On its surface, one might argue that the narrative of *Something's Gotta Give* and its lead characters—aging playboy Harry Sanborn (Nicholson) and middle-aged playwright Erica Barry (Keaton)—fit the conventions of a romantic comedy. For instance, there is the threat of a serious illness as Harry has a mild heart attack and subsequent panic attacks after he and Erica part ways. There is also the prospect of a melodramatic story line, as both Erica and Harry grieve heavily over the loss of their relationship. But Harry's multiple attacks are never treated seriously. Rather, amidst Viagra jokes, shots of Nicholson's naked backside, and Erica's repulsion at having to perform CPR on such a chauvinist (before applying mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, she curses him: "You fucking guy!"), his illness is always treated humorously. Likewise, while both Erica and Harry are affected by their separation, the tone rarely becomes melodramatic. For example, in a lengthy montage, Erica simultaneously laughs and cries hysterically about Harry as she finishes her Broadway play, and after Harry runs into Erica while they are apart, he begins to feel pressure in his chest and, in a neurotic frenzy, checks himself into the hospital. Thus, while we sympathize with these characters, the tone remains mostly comical. Finally, it might seem that because Erica is willing to surrender to the wooing of the young Dr. Julian Mercer (Keanu Reeves), she functions as a traditional passive female character. But, as we will see, Erica is extremely active in the narrative, particularly in her relationship with Harry. Ultimately, then, *Something's Gotta Give* resists the basic conventions of the romantic comedy and instead emphasizes farcical wit, a humorous story line, and an active heroine—all of which are, in fact, central to the screwball comedy.

Elite Settings and Romantic Getaways

Most screwball films of the 1930s, '40s, and today contain elite settings and romantic getaways.[3] Like its screwball predecessors *My Man Godfrey* (1936) and *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *Something's Gotta Give* is set in high society, and the four lead characters are quite wealthy. Erica, a successful New York playwright, owns an extravagant weekend house in the Hamptons. Harry is an equally successful record producer who drives a Mercedes and has multiple around-the-clock personal assistants. Julian is a

doctor who frequents seaside restaurants in the Hamptons and romantic bistros in Paris. Last, Marin Barry (Amanda Peet), Harry's initial romantic partner and Erica's daughter, auctions off extravagant items at Christie's in downtown Manhattan. Screwball comedies also generally position their romantic trysts away from the city, where innocence and romance are not thought to be a priority. Indeed, the three principal romances in *Something's Gotta Give*—those between Marin and Harry, Erica and Harry, and Erica and Julian—all begin in the Hamptons, away from taxicabs, crowded streets, and busy office buildings.

In classical screwball comedies, this focus on leisure traditionally serves three functions. First, it motivates the ideological tensions in the plot; screwball comedies often pair an upper-class lover with one from the middle or working class, and their drastically differing ideas often provide the narrative's conflict. Second, the focus on leisure reminds audiences that the American work ethic is supreme; it is not the working-class character who leaves his or her profession but the upper-class lover who leaves his or her wealthy lifestyle to make the union work. Finally, the attention to leisure in these films pokes fun at the frivolities of high society (Lent 314–15; Karnick 131–32; Gehring, "Screwball" 180–81).

These three functions are present in classical films like *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *Bringing Up Baby* (1938).[4] Additionally, they appear in recent screwball comedies like *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), whose narratives also juxtapose the privileged class with the plain working class and the countryside with the cityscape. However, in *Something's Gotta Give*, these conventions are inserted mainly for cinematographic reasons. Granted, Meyers's use of lush sets and scenery—soft, cream-colored furniture, extravagant restaurants, sandy beaches, and twinkling Parisian lights—reveals the characters' professional success and is thus a part of the film's characterization, but it mostly serves to immerse the viewer in another world and to highlight the stars' appearances. For instance, the whites and nautical blues of a beach scene nicely complement Erica's and Harry's cream wardrobes (see photo). Moreover, because Erica and Harry are from the same social class and have successful careers, neither must step down from his or her job to make the union complete, and the couple's conflicting ideology about love and romance stems mostly from their genders (not class and wealth). Meyers does not seem to use these conventions for the same reasons that directors like Frank Capra, George Cukor, and Preston Sturges did.[5] Still, the conventions remain—a testament perhaps to the stability of the screwball comedy genre.

Physical Comedy

Another convention of the screwball film is that the ideal lovers engage in physical comedy. For instance, we know from the opening scene of *The Philadelphia Story*—in which C. K. Dexter Haven (Cary Grant) cups his entire hand around the face of Tracy Lord (Katharine Hepburn) and shoves her onto the porch floor—that slapstick humor will be a staple in the upcoming narrative. Likewise, we know that we will encounter farce in *Bringing Up Baby* when David Huxley (Cary Grant) falls on his top hat and when Susan Vance (Katharine Hepburn) inadvertently rips open the back of her dress and exposes her undergarments. Similarly, there is repeated physical comedy in *Something's Gotta Give*. For instance, Erica juggles hot coffee while barely managing to avoid spilling it all over her lap. A mildly sedated yet very naked Harry stumbles around the hospital corridors looking for a place to "take a whiz." While looking at old photos of Erica, a startled Harry falls off the side of Erica's bed onto the hardwood floor when he hears her return home from a date with Julian. A traumatized Harry covers his face, stumbles backward into the hallway, and accidentally knocks several pictures off the wall when he unintentionally walks in on a naked Erica. Finally, in the middle of lovemaking, Erica flips Harry onto the bed, straddles him, and takes his blood pressure.

For screwball comedies of the 1930s and '40s, this physicality permitted the lead characters to have a great deal of intimate contact with each other, something that the Hays Code generally forbade onscreen. Tina Olsin Lent notes that such onscreen touching also offered "alternative outlets for repressed sexuality" (328). Obviously, today's film directors and actors are not burdened by the strictures of the Hays Code, so a character's sexual energy does not have to be released onscreen through physical comedy; rather, many directors incorporate a sex scene or two. Indeed, Meyers inserts such a scene in *Something's Gotta Give*. However, rather than completely objectifying the female body and forcing a male perspective in a typical Hollywood sex scene, the director emphasizes the physical (and verbal) comedy that one would actually experience in a classical screwball film: Harry cuts off Erica's turtleneck, Erica forces Harry to take his blood pressure, and both lovers search the bedroom for glasses so that they can read the numbers on the blood pressure machine. Meyers's sex scene, therefore, still functions very much as the physical touching, falling, and tumbling do in classical films.

Verbal Sparring

Although physical humor is commonplace in the screwball comedy, verbal humor may be emphasized even more. For instance, the bickering between Susan and David in *Bringing Up Baby* as Susan is stealing David's car is a forerunner to some of the heated arguments between Meyers's Harry and Erica:

> DAVID: You don't understand: this is *my* car!
> SUSAN: Your golf ball, your running board, your car? Is there anything in the world that doesn't belong to you?
> DAVID: Yes, thank heavens, YOU!

Similarly, in *Something's Gotta Give*, Erica and Harry bicker. For example, she puts down his rap-music record company, taunting, "Oh, come on, how many words can you rhyme with *bitch*?" and he criticizes her scathing inquires about the young women he dates when he quips, "So you *don't* get more mellow as the hours pass?" She scolds a cigar-smoking Harry for "filling [his] already clogged arteries with smoke" and making her "freshly painted house smell like a pool hall," and he snidely retorts, "Have you *always* been like this, or do I bring it

out in you?" Finally, when we learn that Harry still cannot believe that his one-time fiancée Diane Sawyer "ended up with a job where she never showed [her fabulous legs]," Erica quickly retorts, "You're *not* serious? She's Diane Sawyer. She goes into caves in Afghanistan with a *shmatte* on her head, for God's sake. Who cares about her legs?"

Since the more playful and satisfying model of marriage is the dominant one in America today, we expect to find it in [*Something's Gotta Give*], and we do.

This sort of sparring establishes the couple as the most well-matched pair in the narrative, as no other characters come close to dishing out such snappy remarks. Such repartee in screwball films also, however, symbolizes foreplay. Screwball banter functions not as seduction but as foreplay, David Shumway argues, because the fast dialogue should bring about desire in both the man and the woman without making it appear that the woman is merely something to be conquered (404). And indeed, when the consummation scene finally occurs in *Something's Gotta Give*, little literal foreplay is needed because we have already witnessed it through nearly an hour of the couple's verbal sparring.

Love and Marriage

Plots of screwball comedies, like those of romantic comedies, hinge on heterosexual love and marriage. To this end, the topic of marriage is usually discussed throughout, and most of these films conclude with a marriage ceremony or with the promise of marriage (Karnick 132). Although this closure is perhaps somewhat sketchy in the final shot of *Bringing Up Baby* (the couple embraces awkwardly atop a museum's scaffolding),[6] most classical screwball films adhere to this convention. For instance, in *It Happened One Night*, the famous yet flimsy "walls of Jericho" tumble down after Ellie (Claudette Colbert) and Peter (Clark Gable) unite in marriage. In *My Man Godfrey*, Godfrey (William Powell) and Irene (Carole Lombard) are married in a nightclub. In *The Philadelphia Story*, Tracy and Dex eventually (re)approach the altar. And in *His Girl Friday* (1940), Walter (Cary Grant) and Hildy (Rosalind Russell) plan to remarry and go on a honeymoon. Meyers constructs a similar representation of heterosexual love and marriage in *Something's Gotta Give*.

In the final scene of *Something's Gotta Give*, which takes place about a year after Erica and Harry profess their love in Paris, the couple walks into a ritzy New York restaurant (again, an elite setting) with their small family and gold bands on their left hands. Although the rings are rather inconspicuous, they suggest, as screwball comedies do, that marriage is a significant and ultimate goal.[7] There are not many visual references to marriage in the film as blatant as those in the opening of *The Philadelphia Story*, which features a close-up of a wedding invitation and subsequent shots of women commenting on wedding gifts. But *Something's Gotta Give* mentions marriage nearly a dozen times. For instance, during an awkward dinner at the beginning of the film, Erica asks straightforwardly, "Ever been married, Harry?" This question sparks a lengthy discussion not only on marriage, but also on the topics of spinsters, bachelorhood, and failed engagements. Moments later, while chewing his lobster and smiling, Harry likens the institution of marriage to death as he boasts that he has somehow managed to "escape the noose." A third mention occurs later in the film as Harry begins to recover from his heart attack: the lifelong bachelor nonchalantly asks Erica if she would like to join him for a walk on the beach, and as she fumbles around for her answer, Harry reassures her, "It's just a walk, *not* a marriage proposal." Finally, when Erica realizes that her passionate affair with Harry is potentially over, she stands before him and confesses, "I felt something with you that I didn't know really existed. Do you know what that's like after a twenty-year marriage?"

In classical screwball films, the emphasis on marriage has generally been thought to suggest two things: that men and women are incomplete without each other, and that a patriarchal society in which a daughter is a means of exchange between a husband and a father still prevails (Lent 324; Shumway 405–06). However, as Lent points out, the unions in these films, as well as those portrayed in popular magazines and commercial fiction of the 1930s, also symbolized new and exciting expectations of love and marriage for moviegoers of the '30s and '40s. Namely, the verbal gymnastics, physical comedy, and sexual tension implied that marriage should be an emotionally satisfying, sexually stimulating, and physically compatible partnership—a view of marriage that differed considerably from the prevailing Victorian model (Lent 315, 331).

Since the more playful and satisfying model of marriage is the dominant one in America today, we expect to find it in Meyers's film, and we do. This model is first glimpsed in *Something's Gotta Give* when Harry realizes that after years of dating random young women, he unexpectedly finds something much more challenging and profound in a middle-aged woman. After making love with Erica, he tearfully confesses, "I can't remember the last time I cried. I think I'm overwhelmed." Similarly, at the end of the film, Harry travels to Paris to tell Erica how physically and emotionally connected he is to her: "I finally get what it's all about. I'm sixty-three-years old and I am in love for the first time in my life." Erica also shares this ideal for relationships. At one point, she encourages Marin to embark on a quest to find

someone with whom she is compatible: "For three days [when I was with Harry] it was good, it was electrifying. . . . I let someone in and I had the time of my life." We also find this sentiment in the quote from Erica mentioned earlier: "I felt something with [Harry] that I didn't know really existed."

Active and Passive Characters

Finally, the screwball comedy, unlike many Hollywood genres, presents both men and women as subjects and objects. A few of the conventions we have already considered—equal-opportunity slapstick, witty banter that elicits longing in both sexes, and a sexually and emotionally compatible partnership—provide a basis for this convention. Structurally speaking, the screwball heroine cannot soley function as a desiring object or a mere "item of exchange" between men in these narratives because she must be able to act: she must be able to choose, marry, divorce, remarry, and/or refuse her male counterpart(s). Toward this end, the men in screwball films also function as objects, a convention upheld in *Something's Gotta Give*.

As an active subject, Harry initiates walks on the beach, instant-messaging conversations, and a late-night pajama party with Erica. His actions naturally cause Erica to respond to him. For instance, his unexpected presence in Erica's kitchen at the beginning of the film causes her to dial 911 because she thinks he is an intruder. Later, his near heart attack requires her to give him CPR, rush him to the local emergency room, and wait for his results before taking him back to her house. But Erica also functions actively in the film, often leaving Harry in the position of passive bystander. For example, after Erica and Harry consummate their relationship, Erica evidently initiates sex many more times throughout the night, then admits to a physically and emotionally worn-out Harry the next morning, "Oh my God, I *do* like sex." He wearily and rather submissively affirms, "You certainly do." Later in the film, after the couple has parted ways, we watch Harry stand in disbelief, reacting almost wordlessly as a jealous and heartbroken Erica confronts him at a Manhattan restaurant where she has seen him having dinner with a much younger woman. Finally, at the end of the film, it is Erica who truly pursues Harry in Paris, making him respond to her question, "Why'd you come here, Harry?"

These six conventions—elite settings, romantic getaways, slapstick humor, verbal sparring, a marital partnership, and characters that function actively and passively—work together to set up a familiar narrative structure that can be summarized as "boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-finds-girl." But this genre can also be characterized as "*girl*-meets-boy, *girl*-loses-boy, *girl*-finds-boy." Although we could look at the narrative structure of *Something's Gotta Give* via this rather simplistic formula, it would be more useful to situate the film in the context of the subgenres that Kristine Brunovska Karnick puts forth.

The Commitment Comedy, Character Roles, and Narrative Structure

Karnick locates two subgenres of screwball films: *commitment comedies*, which "focus on the establishment of the central couple," and *reaffirmation comedies*, which "concentrate on the reestablishment of the couple after circumstances at the beginning of the film have succeeded in separating them" (131). Because the narrative of *Something's Gotta Give* hinges on the establishment of the central couple, Harry and Erica, the film fits into the first of these two subgenres. Within this structure, Karnick further establishes five character roles, all of which are evident in Meyers's film. The *first partner* (Harry), Karnick summarizes, represents one half of the ideal couple and is involved in an "unsuitable relationship." The narrative's *initial partner* (Marin) is the first partner's unbefitting lover. The *second partner* (Erica) represents the other half of the ideal couple. The *conscience figure* (Erica's sister, Zoe [Frances McDormand]) advises one or both ideal partners on their relationship. And finally, the *blocking figure* (Julian) complicates the relationship between the ideal couple (133–34).

As in all narrative films, the screwball characters and their desires and goals push the story forward. In this genre, as in most Hollywood genres, the story is rather straightforward. In screwball comedies, we move formulaically from an incompatible relationship between two mismatched lovers to a hostile relationship between two ideal lovers, and from a moment of romance with the screwball couple to a period when they are separated. Ultimately, we are granted a happy ending. *Something's Gotta Give* follows this pattern. Its first shot illustrates the first stage of the commitment comedy: the introduction of the initial couple and the flaw within their relationship. After the opening credits, Meyers reveals a medium shot of Harry and Marin as they drive to the Hamptons for a weekend tryst. But Harry, with his wrinkles and receding hairline, and Marin, with her ponytail and vivaciousness, look more like father and daughter than lovers. Almost immediately, then, we recognize that the couple is mismatched and that the impending flaw in their relationship will be their age difference. Shortly after the couple arrives at their destination—the lavish beach house owned by Erica—the film sets up the next elements of the screwball comedy's structure: it introduces the second partner and the conscience figure. Predictably, Erica and her sister enter the house to find a partially clothed and very surprised Harry. The two women are initially shocked by Harry's presence (again, they mistake him for a burglar who "has wandered in here high on ecstasy"), but the ultimate blow comes when the sisters learn that Erica's thirty-year-old daughter is dating this aging playboy. This revelation brings about the next step in the structure of the film: the ideal couple expresses hostility toward each other. When Erica hangs up the phone after dialing 911 and reporting Harry's intrusion, the sheer disgust begins. Harry sarcastically commends Erica on her self-control during the situation, claiming, "Trust me, if I ever catch a guy in his underwear in my refrigerator, I hope I'm half the man you were, Mrs. . . . uh . . ." Squinting her eyes and nodding her head, she infuriatingly waves him

away with, "Yeah. Okay. Whatever." At this point—only five minutes into the movie—the antagonism between the ideal couple is already clear.

According to Karnick, sometime after the ideal couple has been introduced, the second partner will generally express his or her desire to pursue the first partner and, so that the ideal couple may unite, the initial couple must formally end their relationship. The first of these two steps is implied in *Something's Gotta Give* during a late-night snack, over which Harry and Erica engage in their first civil conversation. As Marin walks in on the two, who are wearing their pajamas and are much closer to each other than usual, Marin realizes that a romantic relationship is being established between her mother and the older man with whom she is having a weekend fling. For Erica and Harry to unite, Marin must break up with Harry. The next morning, the daughter (predictably) confides in her mother, "You know me, my life's crazy. I meet a thousand people every day. Also, let's face it, the guy's insanely old for me. I'd be nuts to keep this going." In classical screwball comedies, this step of terminating the initial partnership generally comes much later in the plot structure, but its position early in *Something's Gotta Give* reassures Erica and the audience that Marin and Harry never had sex. The conversation between mother and daughter—in which Erica is clearly concerned that Marin and Harry have been intimate—reinforces this:

> MARIN: Now, Mom, if you could handle this, I was thinking . . . you and Harry.
> ERICA: I can't handle it . . . wouldn't want to handle it.
> MARIN: But you're only saying that 'cause you think he and I have had sex.
> ERICA: Yes. Lower your voice. Haven't you?
> MARIN: (whispering) Never even got close. I swear to God.

We usually expect at least four more fundamental steps in the narrative of the commitment screwball comedy: first, the ideal couple will find themselves trapped in a situation that is not of their own making; second, the ideal couple will separate; third, one ideal partner will track down the other; and fourth, a happy reunion will take place. This structure is maintained in Meyers's film as well. First, a rainstorm and loss of electricity confine Erica and Harry to the beach house alone. Second, Harry's recuperation separates the two when he returns to the city and Erica returns to writing a play. Third, after their time apart (in this case, approximately thirty minutes of screen time), Harry tracks down Erica in Paris, and for the first time in the film, he pursues her. Finally, although Erica initially rejects Harry the two ultimately reunite on the Seine River as snowflakes float all around—the archetypal setting for the happy ending that we anticipate from this film genre.

One brief note on the film's final scene and Harry's pursuit of Erica: that he pursues Erica only once in the film—at the end, in Paris—is noteworthy. As we have already established, as an active screwball heroine, Erica cannot constantly be pursued by the ideal partner, since that would consistently put her in a passive position, which the genre's structure and characterization will not allow; again, both members of the ideal couple function as active agents. This is probably one reason that when Harry pursues Erica in Paris, she initially rejects him and leaves the café with Julian, her current lover. This is probably also the reason that we root for the union of Erica and Harry, not Erica and Julian. Unlike Julian, who pursues Erica throughout the film, Harry does not. Although Julian is purportedly the more appealing of the two men—he is young, good looking, ambitious, romantic, and considerate—we still cheer on the middle-aged, smirking, chauvinistic ladies' man. Aside from one of my colleagues, who confessed that she wished Erica would have stayed with Julian, most critics agree that the better match is Harry and Erica.[8] And although we may think that Harry and Erica should end up together because their characters are closer in age or because Keaton and Nicholson have better onscreen chemistry than Keaton and Reeves, inevitably it is the structure and conventions of this genre (e.g., the preliminary bickering between the ideal lovers, the function of the blocking partner, and so on) that tell us which pair we are supposed to cheer on.[9]

Conclusion

Although Meyers adheres to virtually every aspect of the classical screwball comedy, she does elect to challenge the genre—and, indeed, most Hollywood films—in two noticeable ways. First, most classical and contemporary Hollywood screwball couples are in their early to mid-thirties, but the lead couple in *Something's Gotta Give* is at least twenty years older. Movies like *The Philadelphia Story*, *Holiday* (1938), and *His Girl Friday* are more typical: they feature characters of a marriageable age who are trying to make a name for themselves in the workforce. Consequently, the actors in these films were young: Cary Grant, Katharine Hepburn, Claudette Colbert, Clark Gable, and Rosalind Russell were all in their early to mid-thirties when they began working in the genre. Unsurprisingly, most recent screwball comedies maintain this norm, as the average age of the lead actors in *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003), and *The Break-Up* (2006) is thirty-five. A second way Meyers defies audience expectations is by pairing Keaton's character romantically with Reeves's, thereby inverting the familiar pairing of older men with younger women.[10]

Although these two decisions significantly shape the audience's perception of Meyers's story and its characters, they never conflict with the conventions, character types, or narrative framework of the screwball genre. That *Something's Gotta Give* is able to maintain this balance between the "compulsions of the past and the freedoms of the present," to use Leo Braudy's terms (667), is a testament to the director's deft handling of the genre in which she was working. A common assumption is that genre films—with their uncomplicated characterization, fixed iconography, and repetitive narrative structures—are simple, formulaic, and artistically deficient. Ironically, it is these seemingly unsophisticated features that allow directors such as

Meyers to reshape their narratives in ways that other "classic" films sometimes cannot (Braudy 667). Perhaps, then, Zacharek should advise those other contemporary romantic comedy directors to take notes not only from classical screwball films, but also from Meyers's *Something's Gotta Give*.

NOTES

1. Aside from women, *Something's Gotta Give* reportedly appealed to men, single and married adults, and the young and old. Rebecca Traister asserts that at least "one-third of the audience for [*Something's Gotta Give*] was under 30 and apparently perfectly happy to sit through a film riddled with Viagra, menopause, and heart-attack jokes." Virtually all of the men with whom I have spoken about the film (ranging from ages thirty to sixty) claimed that it was quite entertaining; some, without batting an eye, had even purchased the DVD. Furthermore, of the numerous favorable film reviews that I read, 80 percent are from male critics—men who steered clear of the phrases "chick flick" and "women's movie" and, instead, urged everyone to flock to the cinema to experience the film's "heartbreaking vulnerability" (Ansen) and "convincing characters" (Ebert).

Something's Gotta Give was budgeted at a substantial $80 million, and it grossed more than $266 million in theatrical release worldwide. While this figure is not necessarily staggering when juxtaposed with some of the other top-grossing romantic films in the last few years (such as *What Women Want* [2000] at $374 million or *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* [2002] at $368 million), the numbers are surprising when one considers that the success of *Something's Gotta Give* hinges not on young, attractive stars whose onscreen characters are unabashedly naive toward the topics of love and marriage, but on two noticeably middle-aged actors whose characters are skeptically approaching the potentially weighty consequences of love ("Box Office").

Something's Gotta Give was also critically successful: from various organizations including the Academy, the film received nominations for best production design, best casting, best sound editing (music), best actor (male), and best actor (female). Diane Keaton won a Golden Globe Award, a Golden Satellite Award, and a National Board of Review Award for her performance in the film.

2. For a range of definitions and conventions of the screwball comedy, see Cavell, *Pursuits*; Gehring, *Romantic*; Gehring, "Screwball"; and Shumway.

3. Wes D. Gehring notes that the differences between classical and contemporary screwball comedies are relatively minor: for instance, in recent screwball films, there is more equal time for the two sexes to show comic angst over the relationship, and parody and satire of the film industry often play a part in the story line (e.g., *America's Sweethearts* [2001], *Notting Hill* [1999], and *L.A. Story* [1991]) (*Romantic* 148–50).

4. Both *It Happened One Night*, directed by Frank Capra, and *Bringing Up Baby* unite middle- and upper-class lovers, and Capra's film implies that Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) leaves behind her elitist upbringing and wealth to marry the middle-class news reporter Peter Warne (Clark Gable).

5. Interestingly, most of the films Meyers has written, produced, and/or directed take place in high society; see, for example, *Baby Boom* (1987), *Father of the Bride* (1991), *What Women Want* (2000), and *The Holiday* (2006).

6. See Cavell, "Leopards," for more on the awkward positioning of David and Susan in the final shots of *Bringing Up Baby*.

7. Of course, if one misses the wedding rings, the image of the traditional family—happily married middle-aged adults with their happily married adult children and grandchildren—reiterates this message as well.

8. James Berardinelli maintains, for instance, that "[a]t the end of this long journey, we're rooting for Harry and Erica to be together." See also Johnson; and Wilmington.

9. David Shumway claims that screwball films "always tell us early on who we are supposed to root for"; much of this, he believes, is actually accomplished by casting (403).

10. For example, mainstream films like *A Perfect Murder* (1998), *Entrapment* (1999), *Runaway Bride* (1999), and *Lost in Translation* (2003) feature the much older Michael Douglas, Sean Connery, Richard Gere, and Bill Murray with the much younger Gwyneth Paltrow, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Julia Roberts, and Scarlett Johannson.

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Kelli Marshall is a visiting assistant professor of film studies at the University of Toledo. While most of her publications explore Shakespeare in film, she has written papers on the screwball comedy, the star autobiography, and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

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