

Woman of the Hour: Actor–director Anna Kendrick, a gender politics perspective and all the questions unasked and unanswered

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Woman of the Hour (2023), the directorial debut of actress Anna Kendrick, became available for streaming on Netflix in October. Inspired by an actual event, the film follows a struggling actress (Kendrick) in the 1970s who appears on the dreadful game show *The Dating Game* and unwittingly picks a serial killer (Daniel Zovatto) as her date.

In a limited way, the film may succeed as entertainment but does not make a lasting impression. It shows no interest in broader questions—or even in character development. Instead, its unmistakable purpose is to smear men and promote the antidemocratic #MeToo campaign.

The main thread of the film concerns Sheryl, a young woman who has moved to Los Angeles to become an actress. She firmly refuses to do cheesecake or nude scenes and has a hard time finding work. We see her soldier through an unsuccessful audition with two breezy, condescending men.

After this disappointment, Sheryl’s agent Helen offers her a spot on *The Dating Game* (the original ran from 1965 to 1974, but it was subsequently revived several times). On the show, a single woman asks questions of three bachelors who are hidden from view. At the end, she picks the bachelor she finds most appealing, and the show sends them on a date. Sheryl thinks that appearing on the show would be demeaning, but Helen insists that it will give her exposure and open doors for her. The young actress finally relents, hoping that the appearance might help her career.

Interwoven with Sheryl’s story are scenes focused on Rodney Alcala, a real-life serial killer and rapist linked to eight murders in the 1970s. Rodney charms his victims, often by asking to take photographs of them. He also drops names (such as that of Roman Polanski, with whom

he studied film at New York University). Although we see Rodney seduce, then attack his victims, we learn next to nothing about him. In passing, he more or less acknowledges that his father abandoned him, but this fact comes nowhere close to explaining his psychotic behavior.

The recurring and none-too-subtle theme of the movie (written by Ian McDonald) is that men are the perpetual problem and women the eternally innocent victims. The male characters are points on a spectrum that ranges from fecklessness to deceitfulness, lechery and psychopathy. Kendrick’s film never states this explicitly of course, but its overall mood and atmosphere tend to suggest that strangulation and murder are simply the logical, extreme working out of universal masculine behavior. To say the least, this schema adds nothing to our understanding of society and serves to give aid and comfort to the #MeToo moral warriors.

The casting directors and the host (Tony Hale) of *The Dating Game* want Sheryl to play dumb and look pretty. One bachelor is dim-witted, the second is sleazy and the third is the murderous Rodney. When a woman in the studio audience recognizes Rodney as the killer of her friend, her boyfriend does not believe her and dismisses her concerns. The studio personnel and policemen whom the woman tries to warn either brush her off or shrug their shoulders.

A critical and heavily underscored moment occurs when Sheryl is receiving a touch-up from makeup artist Marilyn (Denalda Williams). Speaking of the interrogation of the male contestants by the various women guests, Marilyn informs Sheryl, “The one thing I’ve learned is no matter what words they use, the question beneath the question [from the female participants] remains the same. ... Which one of you will hurt me?”

In pursuit of its ideological goals, *Woman Hour* inevitably disregards Rodney's own history. He was born in Texas in 1943 to Mexican-American parents. When Rodney was 11, his father abandoned the family, who subsequently moved to the Los Angeles suburbs. Rodney performed well at school, where he apparently was popular with his classmates.

But after he joined the US Army at age 17, his commanding officer noted his tendency to manipulate others and to rebel. Rodney was disciplined several times for assaulting young women. After he went AWOL during an apparent attack of mental illness, he was diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder and received a medical discharge.

Rodney subsequently committed a long series of crimes—beating, raping and killing women—and spent several years behind bars for some of them. After being arrested in 1979, he spent the rest of his life in court and in jail. He died of a heart attack in 2021.

Rodney's military career and jail time are entirely excluded from the movie. Until its final scene, the movie presents Rodney as able to evade the law and escape punishment. Notably, the *Dating Game* audience member who identified Rodney as a killer is fictitious. This character was invented purely to be dismissed, deceived and ignored by male characters, thus hammering home the film's message.

Woman of the Hour's perspective is crude and false. A great amount of attention clearly went into the recreation of the décor, clothing and technology of the 1970s. But what of the generalized circumstances that produced Alcala and other sociopaths? If men were always such monsters, why was there a noticeable increase in the number of serial killers in the US in the 1970s and 1980s? Did this have anything to do with concrete social, economic and cultural changes taking place?

The receding of the radical wave of the 1960s and early 1970s, the sharp, retrograde change in the social climate, the shift to the right by considerable sections of the middle class and certain portions of workers too, the marked and brazen growth in hedonism and "self-realization," the birth of the "Me Generation," all of this had to have an impact on the most psychologically vulnerable.

As noted, *Woman of the Hour* implies that the tendencies toward sexual assault and murder are simply part of maleness. This pseudo-biological canard fits in neatly with the #MeToo perspective and seeks to preempt discussion of the objective social, economic,

political and historical factors that work. But it is precisely these factors that must be examined to understand a phenomenon as significant and malevolent as the preponderance of serial killers.

The US has not only the largest number of serial killers in the world, but also more serial killers than the next ten highest countries on the list combined, according to Radford University. What accounts for this astonishing discrepancy?

The status of the US as the world's dominant imperialist power cannot fail to influence this phenomenon. More than any other country, the US exemplifies the subordination of politics, education, culture, healthcare—in short, all social concerns—to the interests of finance capital. Every sphere of American life is polluted by the glorification of militarism, individualism and competition. Science is regarded with suspicion or outright hostility, and culture is dismissed as trivial or superfluous. To fund horrific and criminal wars, governments of both major parties have subjected programs that promote individual and social well-being to relentless attack.

But *Woman of the Hour* never indicts American society for producing individuals such as Rodney or comes anywhere near to that. Intellectual laziness and slovenliness account for this in part. It is difficult to tell the social truth. Most contemporary filmmakers would rather not tax themselves. Moreover, a social layer is in action here that merely wants a greater share of the wealth. With this aim, advocates of the #MeToo campaign hurl accusations of sexual misconduct and ruin careers. For them, due process and the presumption of innocence are obstacles that must be swept aside.

Such a perspective is incapable of producing a film that portrays social and psychological reality truthfully or satisfyingly. If viewers of *Woman of the Hour* remember anything about the film, it will be its ham-fisted focus on gender, which crowds out any meaningful examination of the story that it ostensibly depicts.



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