

The Last Showgirl and why “the real rebel move is staying soft”

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The Last Showgirl is a concise and powerful film portraying a cabaret performer as she navigates the end of her long-running show and—as becomes clear—her dancing career.

Kate Gersten’s unpublished play *Body of Work*, inspired by the closing of *Jubilee!*, the revue that played at Bally’s Las Vegas from 1981 to 2016, forms the basis for *The Last Showgirl*. Director Gia Coppola is Francis Ford Coppola’s granddaughter. The film also features Jamie Lee Curtis, the daughter of Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh, and Billie Lourd, the only child of Carrie Fisher (and only grandchild of Debbie Reynolds.).

The film opens as the poster girl for *Le Razzle Dazzle*, Shelly Gardner (Pamela Anderson), is grocery shopping with her friend Annette (Curtis), a retired dancer-turned-cocktail waitress. Shelly gathers produce for a meal she intends to prepare for a love interest, only to get a text from him at the self-checkout. The cancellation text is part of a pattern of short-term romances that leave Shelly hoping for more.

The duo whips up a “girls’ night” at Shelly’s modest dwelling, inviting young *Le Razzle Dazzle* performers Mary-Anne (Brenda Song) and Jodie (Kiernan Shipka). These younger women clearly look up to their older colleagues. The show’s manager, Eddie (Dave Bautista—*Guardians of the Galaxy*) arrives with a bottle of wine and some bad news: *Le Razzle Dazzle* is closing soon.

Ticket sales have declined. Tastes have changed. And Shelly herself is in decline, a fact only highlighted by the impending end of her 30-year run at *Le Razzle Dazzle*. An intensifying examination of her life frames the unfolding drama, rich in detail and liveliness.

Shelly’s initial response to the show’s cancellation takes the form of a criticism of the newer shows for

which her colleagues are now auditioning. As Jodie goes through the risqué choreography of a recent audition, Shelly cannot bear to witness it and stops her.

Shelly has a daughter, Hannah, roughly the same age as Jodie (when leaving her a voicemail, Shelly cannot recall precisely how old). Hannah (Lourd) is about to begin a career in photography. Her mother’s advice to follow her dreams—her artistic passion—strikes a highly conflicted note with the younger woman.

Perhaps unaware as to how her own dedication to stage life has affected Hannah, Shelly touts her career-over-convention decision, as Hannah recoils in resentment. We eventually learn that Hannah’s real father is Eddie, and not Shelly’s ex-husband, a fact the latter fiercely conceals.

Hannah wants answers about her upbringing and Shelly’s relative absence from it. She confronts her mother in the show’s dressing room (much of the drama unfolds here, where the makeup, feathers and rhinestones come on and off). The girl explains she just saw a performance of *Le Razzle Dazzle* and had hoped to find in it some justification for her mother’s devotion to it, some merit that made it all worthwhile.

In the first heavy dose of reality for Shelly, Hannah tells her she thought the dancing was basic, the show altogether unimpressive. She couldn’t believe her mother would leave her in the parking lot as a kid to play Game Boy while performing in what amounted to an overblown and ridiculous display of dozens and dozens of glittering bosoms.

The writing and direction draw out this central conflict with sympathy to both women.

Economic concerns weigh on Shelly too. When she has her paycheck docked for stumbling and causing a rip in her costume, it feels like an Amazon-style attack, a merit-based pay scheme.

At Annette’s suggestion, Shelly pursues Eddie romantically, because he will continue to have work, a pension and health insurance, and he is “sort of cute.” Shelly’s decision to “doll herself up” and essentially audition for a husband is a saddening degradation.

The dinner date in question begins in style and rapidly devolves into disaster, an inflection point for Shelly, who now turns with hostility toward Eddie and then to her fellow performers. Why didn’t they tell her she was getting too old, or wasting her life?

The Last Showgirl draws Shelly with a multi-sided realism and sensitivity.

One admires her friendships with Annette, Jodie and Mary-Anne, and her hunger for reconciliation with Hannah. But as a real human, she has her warts too. Ego and self-delusion have played their collective part. Shelly loved being the star of the show, the most glamorous girl, the one on the poster. Her professed loyalty to the show contains an element of self-aggrandizement and it clouds her ability to make a more honest assessment of *Le Razzle Dazzle*’s tastelessness and vulgarity.

However, Shelly is not treated in a moralizing fashion for this either. Her hunger for the spotlight and her good looks have been used to generate revenue, and now the aging dancer is being cast aside like an old tire.

Annette rings true as well. She resents Eddie for removing her from *Le Razzle Dazzle* for reasons that are not entirely clear, but age seems a likely one. Now a cocktail waitress at a casino, younger women crowd her out of the work schedule, pushing her to the brink. She projects a resilient “devil may care” front that barely conceals her own increasing economic insecurity. Annette personifies Shelly’s future.

One is invited to chuckle briefly at some of some of Shelly’s antics. In response to the question, “Do you have music?” she grandly tells a casting director (Jason Schwartzman) at an audition that she has given it “to the maestro.” (One imagines an unpaid intern inserting a compact disc into a player). This is rounding her out and not ridicule. In the film’s climax, sympathy and justification reign, as Shelly passionately and mockingly rebukes the casting director before storming out of the audition.

Anderson’s performance as Shelly is a career-defining event. “This is why my life has been the way it is, so I can do this project” she told a CBC interviewer.

The parallels between her own career—as a model, Playboy playmate and actress on the swimsuit-themed *Baywatch*—and Shelly’s are unmistakable. It is to her credit that Anderson is able to look at herself and her life in a frank and even self-critical manner.

Importantly, Anderson came to the vigorous defense of persecuted WikiLeaks journalist Julian Assange. In 2019, she told the WSWS in an interview “that Assange, who she has known for years, ‘created WikiLeaks so that people could find a way to be informed,’ and to ‘end these awful wars and bring us all closer together.’” Anderson insisted to the WSWS that the US government’s attempt to prosecute Assange was a fundamental attack on democratic rights.

Regarding her approach to aging and acting, she told writer Gersten that “the real rebel move is staying soft,” i.e., remaining sensitive and avoiding cynicism, a true and important sentiment. Coppola’s depiction of aging entertainers in “America’s adult playground” is a turn to serious subject matter, and the results are generally impressive.



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