

Arts & Entertainment

Labor Day

By Jan Lisa Huttner

SOMETHING OLD:

13 Conversations About One Thing

SOMETHING NEW:

Beauty Shop

SOMETHING BORROWED:

Erin Brockovich

SOMETHING BLUE:

Japanese Story

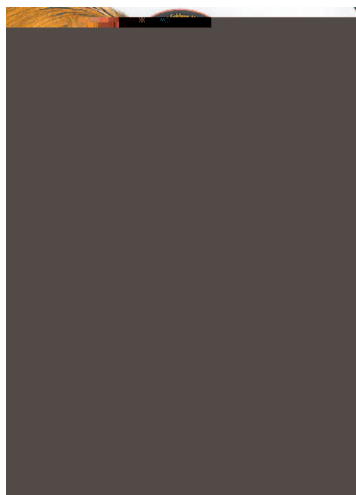
As we say a fond farewell to another summer and head into Fall, here are four films about workplace identities in the modern world.

Jill and Karen Sprecher first attracted attention with *Clockwatchers*, their 1997 feature about four temps on the bottom rung of an enormous corporation. In 2001, they released *13 Conversations About One Thing*, a film with many of the same themes, but broader and deeper. The sisters share screenwriting credits on both films, with Jill named director.

The anchor of *13 Conversations* is Gene, a middle-aged, middle-manager in a large Manhattan insurance company. Gene – exquisitely played by Alan Arkin – is a divorced workaholic, and loneliness is slowly corroding all his interactions. One night he meets Troy (Matthew McConaughey). Their casual bar stool conversation marks a turning point in both lives. When Troy leaves the bar, he has a tragic encounter with Beatrice (Clea DuVall), but when Gene leaves the bar, he has a brief encounter with Patricia (Amy Irving) which, though wordless, is filled with redemptive beauty.

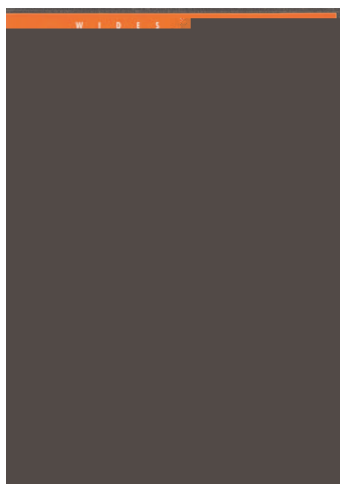
Beatrice is a house-cleaner, Troy is an attorney, Patricia is the wife of a University professor. Just like Gene, all three are initially defined by the jobs that they do. But the filmmakers weave their stories together in profound ways, so that, by the end, we know we have peeked into the lives of indelible individuals.

13 Conversations is a wonderful film, but it's serious and pensive. *Beauty Shop*, on the other hand, is pure fun. Gina, the Queen Latifah character from *Barbershop 2*, leaves Chicago and



The Queen exercises her real-life powers as both star and producer by peopling *Beauty Shop* with a diverse set of well-known actors like Andie MacDowell, Keshia Knight Pulliam, Della Reese, Alicia Silverstone, Mena Suvari, and Alfre Woodard, all of whom play for laughs and get them. And then there's Djimon Hounsou as Joe, the "love interest" with a capital L: wow!

Warning: this is a movie to share with your girlfriends. Guys who complain about Kevin Bacon's Eurotrash accent without realizing that screenwriter Kate Lanier (best-known for writing the Tina Turner bio-pic *What's Love Got to Do with It*) is just setting them up, will rain on the parade.



and you'll be unexpectedly moved by screenwriter Susannah Grant's detailed character development, fact-based but also deeply empathetic.

Grant plays on our prejudices, deliberately making it easy for us to underestimate Erin at the beginning of the film. She's larger-than-life in all the wrong ways, and the chip on her shoulder is so huge it's no wonder she always eats alone.

But Erin's self-pity crumbles when she meets

people who make her problems seem small, and by fighting for them, she learns the difference between brazen self-assertion and genuine self-respect. The feminist lines in *Beauty Shop* are ebullient, but the feminist lines in *Erin Brockovich* were written earnestly and read with hard-won sincerity.

(Curious about the "real" EB? Enter her full name "Erin Brockovich-Ellis" into your favorite search engine.)

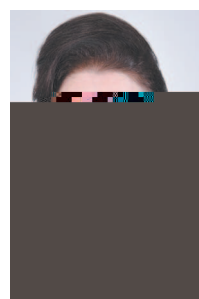


In *Japanese Story*, an Australian geologist named Sandy (Toni Collette) plays tour guide to a Japanese businessman named Hiromitsu (Gotaro Tsunashima). Starting out, Sandy and Hiromitsu see each other as total stereotypes. Hiromitsu thinks

Sandy is crude, with absolutely no feminine qualities. Sandy, feeling the condescension beneath his wealth and polish, thinks Hiromitsu is both spoiled and rude.

Driving together into the enormity of the Australian outback, Sandy is annoyed and aggrieved, but Hiromitsu is mesmerized by the endless, empty vistas. As his concept of space begins to change, his personality begins to expand. Finding herself locked in the car with him for days on end and forced to relate, Sandy also begins changing her concept of space, and she slowly opens herself up to intimacy. Sue Brooks directed this cross-cultural masterpiece based on a screenplay by Alison Tilson.

Women's roles were once narrowly proscribed, but now many women are increasingly challenged to craft their own destinies. Women filmmakers, who must fight so hard to get their movies made, are great guides to this new reality.



Jan Lisa Huttner is the Managing Editor of *FILMS FOR TWO: The Online Guide for Busy Couples*. A complete archive of Jan's reviews for the *Woman's Newspapers*™ can be found in the "Treasures" section of www.films42.com.