

Extending the date line

By Marilyn Gardner, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor / February 11, 2004

Sherry Alpert never watches a movie twice. But this winter she made an exception to her rule: She headed back to the theater for a second viewing of "Something's Gotta Give," Hollywood's valentine to mature love. As a 50-ish public relations consultant who has been divorced for five years, she knows well the foibles, frustrations, and poignant humor of midlife dating, as played out on the screen by Diane Keaton and Jack Nicholson.

"It's nice they finally made a romantic comedy for people over 50 who are getting a second chance at love," says Ms. Alpert of Canton, Mass. "You get so tired of those older man-younger woman movies."

After years of remaining largely in the shadows, midlife daters are getting their day in the sun. In addition to the Keaton-Nicholson romp, a play called "Bad Dates," about a 40-ish divorcée who is reentering the dating game, just ended a successful run in Boston.

Even dating services and websites are beginning to target older clients. In Denver, a new matchmaking service, Classic Connections, caters specifically to the 50-and-over set. While younger singles want to marry and have a family, those in their 50s and beyond are typically more interested in long-term companionship, says founder Kris Kenny.

"A lot are getting close to retirement, they've put away money, and they want to explore the world," Ms. Kenny says. "They would just love to do it with someone else."

Never have so many Americans been unattached in their middle years. The 36 million singles over 45 account for nearly 40 percent of that age group. Fifteen percent of Americans in their 50s are divorced, 4 percent are widowed, and 6 percent have never said "I do."

For moviegoers watching Nicholson lose his heart to Keaton after first being smitten by her under-30 daughter, "Something's Gotta Give" raises an intriguing question: Are middle-aged men in real life choosing women who are their contemporaries? Or is it still true, as Keaton observes early in the film, that "the over-50 dating scene is geared to leaving women out"?

Opinions are decidedly mixed.

"The vast majority of men still prefer younger mates," says April Masini, a relationship expert in Beverly Hills, Calif. Nicholson himself has reportedly been spotted with a 30-something girlfriend.

But Patti Feinstein, a dating coach in Chicago, thinks it's a misconception that men

want to date young women. "Many complain that they just can't relate intellectually to a woman who is significantly younger," she says. "They don't want to go dancing in a club."

What they do want is women who are active.

Scott Wheeler, who owns a multimedia development company in Chicago, prefers the company of women his age.

"That's really worked in my favor, because a lot of men my age want someone who's 15 years younger," he says. "They're totally missing the boat in all respects."

Six months ago Mr. Wheeler began dating Emily Calvo, a freelance writer he met online. She is three years older than he is. An AARP survey last year found that a third of women over 40 are dating younger men.

"In general, the more mature the man, the more willing he is to date women his own age," says Mary Valentis, who teaches popular culture at the State University of New York at Albany. "He doesn't need a trophy girl to make him feel good."

Stereotypes abound

Still, both sexes harbor stereotypes about age. "If I say a woman is 58, men think she's sitting in a rocking chair, knitting," Ms. Feinstein says. "When you say 55, they associate it with an old lady. It's just not true." Similarly, women are likely to regard men in their age bracket as couch potatoes.

Michael Lasky, coauthor of "Online Dating for Dummies," calculates that in terms of social experience, a generation is about seven years. After that, a couple's tastes in music, food, and entertainment, along with their points of reference, vary widely. "Once you start going beyond 10 years, you are adding one more complication to the challenge of mating," he says.

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