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Chuck Chuck Baby

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Chuck Chuck Baby

Abstract

This is a film review of *Chuck Chuck Baby* (2023), directed by Janis Pugh.

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Author Notes

Sherry Coman is the Director of the Centre for Spirituality and Media at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario, where she also teaches courses in film, media and spirituality and also in gender justice. An ordained deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, she is also a writer, educator and story editor with more than thirty years experience in theatre and film. She works privately as a development consultant with writers and artists in film, fiction and digital media and is the curator and creator of online devotional projects.



***Chuck Chuck Baby* (2023), dir. Janis Pugh**
Trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zxh4g_JA00Q

Janis Pugh's third feature film, *Chuck Chuck Baby*, is a deeply satisfying movie musical and a moving paean to women laborers everywhere. Set in an industrial area of North Wales, the film follows Helen, a thirty-something worker in the “Chuck Chuck Baby” chicken processing plant of her small town. Somehow life has dealt her hard turns: she is sharing a home with her ex-husband, his new partner and their baby. A fourth housemate is Gwen, the ex-husband’s palliative mother, with whom Helen has her only nurturing and affirming relationship. Rounding out Helen’s day-to-day routine is hanging out with her co-worker friends, a larger-than-life group of women whose salty commentary is as infectious as their laughter. Between these women and Gwen, Helen finds her only sense of belonging.

Helen's world is turned upside down when Joanne, another former chicken processing worker, returns to the house next door after a death in that family. Helen and Joanne had a youthful shared crush that left both of them disappointed. As the two women slowly reconnect and rediscover each other, Joanne's playfully ironic courtship style helps to erode Helen's sadness and lift

her confidence. Using a mannequin head fitted with wigs and other random objects Joanne finds, she and Helen carve out a space in Joanne's backyard where the two women can liberate themselves from their own fears and inhibitions. Soon they have become each other's fixation.

Chuck Chuck Baby is about those in family systems who are outsiders—even to those they live with. Both Helen and Joanne have been estranged by loss, and that includes the loss of each other at another time. In order to find each other again, they have to overcome all of their losses and reckon with who they are deep inside. The film's story articulates this through the decline of Gwen, who increasingly and urgently wants Helen to be happy. Because Gwen can sense Helen's longing for Joanne, we sense that Gwen's commitment to Helen will move beyond her own death. When that plot point inevitably arrives, it brings with it an unexpected opportunity for Helen—and she must decide what she wants to do with it.

Death hangs over both characters in the film like a siren's call to life's purpose. The death of Gwen and of Joanne's father spur each woman into self-reflection. During this time, the relationship starts to teeter a bit while the past rushes up to the surface and old bruises become new wounds. Both women's sense of isolation becomes worse instead of better: while Helen lives in a family dwelling where she has little identity and agency, Joanne is literally and figuratively alone. We see her wandering around the empty house where she grew up and from which her father was recently deceased. Louise Brealey as Helen and Annabel Scholey as Joanne offer us contrasting nuance in their roles: while Helen's face seems to tell us everything, Joanne's face is hardened, concealing her emotion. Both actors bring depth and humor to the slow transformation of their characters.

Despite some of its sadder context, *Chuck Chuck Baby* rises above depression and sadness by moving through those emotions into an evolved new place. The film's musical sequences play

a critical role in that transformation. One advantage of the jukebox musical form is that almost any track can be relevant to a moment of character. Songs ranging from Neil Diamond to Janis Ian are held together in a connection of emotional dots. Helen sings in the car while grappling with her own restlessness; Joanne sings to herself while moving around her childhood bedroom. But there are also larger scenes where the women sing together, particularly in a sequence in the rain that seems right out of *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*. In this way, the film's musicality has more in common with opera than with other movie musicals. There is not just an interiority but a privacy to the singing, a moment of deep intimacy with the character. The film gets away with it, because it is the only way our characters' hearts can be unleashed.

There is an unexpected quality of magic realism to *Chuck Chuck Baby*, especially in a moment when all of the women climb to the top of a nearby mountain and find unusual rainbow-colored poppy-like flowers in the meadow which seem out of place within the Welsh landscape, and perhaps right off the side of a 1960s Volkswagen bug. When the women lie down among them and link arms, laughing and singing, we know we are in a transported world, created out of love and happiness.

The film moves back and forth between this kind of beautiful fantasy-like dream world and the gritty realism of the industrial world of the town. As Helen and Joanne find their way, the two worlds begin to fuse, until the final sequence allows us to experience a physical and spiritual transcendence, even as the characters do, as they are looked on by their mates.

Chuck Chuck, Baby is too gritty to be dismissed as a feel-good romp, and too sophisticated to be a lesbian rom-com. It defies genres, unabashedly immersing us in love and longing, and leaving us in a much happier place than when we began.