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On Upper West Side, a Walking Tour for Romantic Comedy Lovers



A walking tour on the Upper West Side focused on movie locations from romantic comedies led by entertainment writers Jennifer Armstrong, in rose dress above, and Erin Carlson stopped by The Aphrope apartment building at 2211 Broadway. The late writer/director Nora Ephron was a longtime resident of the The Aphrope, and the building was featured in the 1986 film adaptation of her novel "Heartburn."

By Kirthana Ramiseti

On a Sunday afternoon in early September, a casually dressed group of women assembled in front of an organic dry cleaner on New York's Upper West Side.

Despite its ordinary appearance, the shop on Columbus Avenue and 69th Street is a mecca for romantic comedy lovers, entertainment journalists Jennifer Armstrong and Erin Carlson told the women. The exterior served as the site of the Shop Around the Corner, which fans of the 1998 Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks movie "You've Got Mail" might remember as the children's bookstore owned by Ms. Ryan's character, Kathleen Kelly.

This was the starting point for *Ms. Armstrong and Ms. Carlson's walking tour of romantic comedy film sites.*

From the 1960 classic “The Apartment” to more recent fare such as 2007’s “Music & Lyrics,” the Upper West Side has often served as the backdrop for so-called rom-coms.

The leafy, tree-lined neighborhood turns out to be an ideal setting to depict characters falling in love.

“The Upper West Side is so beautiful, sparkly, clean, and spacious compared with a lot of other New York neighborhoods,” said Ms. Armstrong, author of “Mary and Lou and Rhoda and Ted,” a backstage history of the “The Mary Tyler Moore Show.” “It looks and feels like a movie set.”



The Everett Collection

Meg Ryan gives a speech outside of her character’s fictional store in “You’ve got Mail.”

“You’ve Got Mail” and “When Harry Met Sally,” movies written by the late Nora Ephron, have indelibly linked the Upper West Side with the crowd-pleasing genre. In fact, the idea for the tour came when the two friends were planning a movie night and began acting out scenes from “You’ve Got Mail.”



Agaton Strom for The Wall Street Journal

And here is what the store looks like today: La Mode Organic Cleaners on West 69th. The site is a main spot on the tour.

Sidetour, a website that allows users to host and book tours in various cities, had approached Ms. Armstrong about giving a walking tour based on her “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” book, but that conversation with Ms. Carlson made her realize romantic comedies were a better fit.

“Suddenly, we saw a way that all of this knowledge we have of the movie genre that shaped our lives would finally do some good,” said Ms. Armstrong.

Before the first tour, Ms. Carlson expressed hope that attendees would view it as an opportunity to “fully embrace their love for the genre,” which is sometimes scoffed at by critics for being frivolous and passed over by studios in favor of action movies.

“Wanting to hang out in Nora Ephron’s New York is equally valid to, say, living vicariously through macho anti-heroes like Tony Soprano and Walter White,” said Ms. Carlson of the protagonists from “The

Sopranos” and “Breaking Bad.”

Five women — all New Yorkers, ranging in age from late 20s to late 50s — signed up for the inaugural walking tour, which the organizers plan to offer again twice in October. The tour stopped at seven filming locations between 69th Street and 83rd Street, and at each stop, Ms. Armstrong and Ms. Carlson shared the story of the site’s connection to the silver screen. There’s Café Luxembourg, the setting of a famous double date scene in “When Harry Met Sally,” and a Starbucks on 81st and Broadway that was frequented by the lead characters in “You’ve Got Mail.”

As the group traveled uptown, the walking tour evolved into a discussion among like-minded fans. The guides and tour-goers exchanged opinions on an assortment of topics, from who is the modern-day Ms. Ryan (Rachel McAdams, star of “The Notebook,” was suggested) to the delightfully odd casting of comedian Dave Chappelle as Tom Hanks’ sidekick in “You’ve Got Mail.” The tour concluded at the bar Prohibition with a screening of “You’ve Got Mail,” with Ms. Carlson and Ms. Armstrong trading quips and offering commentary.

Cat Pappas, an Upper East Side resident who works in television production, said that the tour offered interesting tidbits on some of her favorite films but also provided a look at New York’s transformation. For every Café Luxembourg still going strong, there were plenty of other neighborhood mainstays, such as H&H Bagels, that had disappeared.

“For me, it was a lot about how the city is changing,” said Ms. Pappas. “These places are iconic in your mind from films, and they aren’t even here anymore.”

Gina O’Connor, 27, a graduate student at Columbia University who moved to the city a few weeks ago from Michigan, said that her love of romantic comedies has made the transition easier for her.

“They kind of made me really feel familiar with New York, having never been,” said Ms. O’Connor. She added that visiting filming locations such as Central Park “helped alleviate the stress and overwhelmingness of it all.”

And it’s that kind of comfort that romantic comedies provide, the tour guides said. While they say that the genre has experienced a decline, the good news for rom-com fans is that the romantic comedy is now thriving on the small screen in such television shows as “Parks and Recreation,” “The New Girl” and “The Mindy Project.”

Even so, at various times during the tour, the attendees and tour guides expressed how much they missed a good movie romance.

“Life is hard enough,” said Ms. Carlson. “It’s OK to bask in the satisfaction of cinematic soulmates finding each other.”

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