

# “DROP DEAD GORGEOUS,” WHICH IS FINALLY STREAMING, IS POSSIBLY MY FAVORITE MOVIE OF ALL TIME

By Jia Tolentino  
July 5, 2019

“Drop Dead Gorgeous,” the mockumentary about a teen-age beauty pageant in the fictional town of Mount Rose, Minnesota, was released in 1999. Made for somewhere between ten and fifteen million dollars, it earned just ten and a half million in theatres. In the *Times*, Janet Maslin wrote that the movie contained “what may be a record number of miserably unfunny jokes.” In *L.A. Weekly*, Manohla Dargis declared that it had “no metaphoric resonance, no ostensible target, and finally, no purpose outside of its own existence.” In the *San Francisco Examiner*, Wesley Morris called it “relentlessly defective” and suggested that, given the dearth of mainstream movies about the poor white underclass, it “should be renamed ‘Drop Dead Ghetto’ and hauled off to the ‘Jerry Springer’ hall of shame.”

They weren’t entirely wrong. The movie is full of stereotypes, actively offensive toward nearly

every American subgroup, and occasionally disgusting—at one point, pageant hopefuls, hanging over hotel balconies, vomit pink globs of shellfish en masse. And, yet, for two decades, whenever I’ve said “Drop Dead Gorgeous,” it’s invariably been followed by the words “is possibly my favorite movie of all time.” For twenty years, it’s existed only as a physical artifact, mostly lost in the no man’s land of VHS and DVD cabinets. But it has recently become available on YouTube for rental or purchase, and, on Friday, just ahead of its twentieth anniversary, it will come to a streaming network (Hulu) for the first time. I am one of many, many people who have been anticipating this development with deep gratitude and relief.

The transformation of “Drop Dead Gorgeous” from a flop to a venerated artifact of Y2K-era camp began with bored teen-agers, most of them female and/or queer, who flocked to Blockbusters around the country and rented the movie over and over, as my friends and I did for years. The movie centers on a lopsided rivalry between Amber Atkins, a working-class sweetheart with corn-silk hair and an after-school job doing makeup on embalmed corpses, and Becky, a stone-cold rich girl who carries her breasts around like a warning and looks at the camera as if she wants to leave it penniless in a divorce. Amber has been raised in a trailer park by her mother, Annette, a nicotine-crazed beautician. Becky’s mother, Gladys, is a homicidal queen bee who

racks up a body count in her quest to secure her daughter the Mount Rose American Teen Princess crown. The movie was directed by Michael Patrick Jann, who was then still in his twenties but had gained a following for his work on the beloved MTV sketch-comedy show “The State.” But the obvious draw is the cast. Amber is played by a seventeen-year-old Kirsten Dunst; Becky is played by Denise Richards, who was then twenty-eight. Annette is Ellen Barkin; her best friend is Allison Janney (in a warmer, and more mischievous, version of her role in “I, Tonya,” which won her an Oscar, in 2018). Becky’s mother is played by Kirstie Alley. Brittany Murphy plays an artless, dorky pageant contestant named Lisa, and Amy Adams is Leslie, a contestant who occupies the obligatory role of slutty cheerleader. (It was Adams’s movie debut.) In one of the movie’s most off-color casting decisions, Will Sasso, from “MADtv,” plays the mentally disabled brother of one of the judges. Lona Williams, a Minnesota-raised former teen beauty queen who wrote the screenplay, plays another judge, a strained, silent, harassed woman named Jean.

The world of the movie is all kitsch and gimmick, a non-stop gag of *yah-you-betcha* Midwest

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provincialism interrupted by violent flares of criminal disorder. The Minnesota farmland rolls endlessly into the distance, as if Mount Rose existed inside a box of Land O’Lakes butter. One of Becky’s classmates dies in a mysterious tractor accident, leaving Becky to succeed her as the new president of the Lutheran Sisterhood Gun Club, the logo of which is a cross with a shotgun where a Savior might hang. “Jesus loves winners,” Becky says, firing a pistol at a shooting range. We see Amber tap-dancing around an embalming room with a Discman—tap-dancing is her talent for the pageant—while dusting blush on the cheeks of someone who died in a hunting accident, in order to re-create an outdoorsy, post-hunt glow. On the night of the pageant, the previous year’s winner, who has been hospitalized for anorexia, is wheeled onstage in a dark wig and an I.V. drip to lip-synch, arms flapping, to “Don’t Cry Out Loud.”

I had no idea, when I watched the movie for the first or the tenth time, that many respectable adults would find all of this not just hollow but irritating and even reprehensible. The black comedy of “Drop Dead Gorgeous” is guided by a deranged value system that’s particular to the world of teen-age girls. Nearly every review of the movie compares it unfavorably to “Smile,” a

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beauty-pageant satire from 1975, which was directed by Michael Ritchie. “Smile” deploys similar tropes—a creep-shot story line, a flubbed dance routine, a contestant performing uncomfortable ethnic shtick—but it does so with more subtlety, and without appearing to dehumanize its

characters. If the two movies had to compete in a beauty pageant, of course the judges would favor the contestant that was softer, nicer, more empathetic, less calculating, and radiant like the sun. But what “Drop Dead Gorgeous” understands so well is that being a teen-age girl *is*, in fact, deranged and dehumanizing and frequently unsubtle. It certainly felt that way at the turn of the twenty-first century, when visible G-strings and virginity pledges were in vogue simultaneously, and young female pop stars were flagrantly doing exactly what is expected of contestants in a teen beauty pageant—performing desirability while projecting naïveté.

But part of what makes teen girls so good at projecting faux ingenuousness is the fact that, sometimes, their ingenuousness is completely real. With the necessary exceptions delivered by Richards and Alley as the movie’s out-and-out villains, there is a profound and unlikely sweetness to the performances in “Drop Dead Gorgeous” that transforms the material of the script into something resembling the performance of femininity itself. It is offensive, for sure—completely

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awful, really, and possibly deadly. It is also irreplaceable, hilarious, surprisingly tender, and lavishly, magnificently absurd.

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**A**fter the movie bombed, Lona Williams tried to tap a similar vein in her next screenplay, writing a cheerleader bank-robbery movie, “Sugar & Spice,” but she was so bothered by changes that were made during production that she took her name off of it. (The movie came out in 2001, with a script credited to Mandy Nelson, who doesn’t exist; like “Drop Dead Gorgeous,” it bombed.) Michael Patrick Jann, meanwhile, has not directed another feature film. But, five years ago, Allison Janney told BuzzFeed that she’s approached by fans more about “Drop Dead Gorgeous” than about any other project she’s worked on, despite winning four Emmys for her part on “The West Wing.” The movie continues to inspire drag shows and viewing parties and indie-music videos. I have personally purchased the DVD three different times.

Now that the movie is once again widely available, I hope that another generation of loving, sadistic, ridiculous teen-agers comes to know it. Young people today seem to have a native understanding of the tension between calculation and naturalness that has always defined beauty pageants and that now defines much of identity performance in general. They’ve grown up steeped in the absurd darkness that this tension produces. They already know what “Drop Dead Gorgeous” showed me when I was a ninth-grader: that the smile of a beauty queen, the glinting crown and the heaps of flowers, always holds the faint scent of bloodlust, and a whisper of the grave.