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CRITICS PICK

Film Review: 'Call Me by Your Name'

'I Am Love' director Luca Guadagnino weaves a beguiling tale of first love, as Armie Hammer and Timothée Chalamet share a steamy Italian summer

By Peter Debruge

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Courtesy of the Berlinale

As numerous are the ways in which Luca Guadagnino's latest (and most personal) film, "Call Me by Your Name," advances the canon of gay cinema, none impresses more than the fact that it's not necessarily a gay movie at all — at least, not in the sense of being limited to LGBT festivals and audiences. Rather, the "I Am Love" director's ravishingly sensual new film, adapted from André Aciman's equally vivid coming-out/coming-of-age novel, is above all a story of first love — one that transcends the same-sex dynamic of its central couple, much as "Moonlight" has.

Acquired by Sony Pictures Classics shortly before its Sundance premiere, this Proustian account of an Italo-American 17-year-old's transformative summer may not be as commercial as "Moonlight," but it ought to be a word-of-mouth art-house hit all the same — especially when talk turns to what teenage Elio Perlman (Timothée Chalamet) and American summer guest Oliver (Armie Hammer) do with a ripe peach.

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Had the film been made in 1983, when the book is set, or 2007, when it was published, the steamy forbidden-fruit scene would surely have landed an NC-17 rating. Today, neither audiences nor the MPAA seem quite so squeamish about such demonstrations of passion, no matter how nontraditional. If anything, the scandalous moment should only help the film to reach its fullest potential audience — as will its sun-blissed Northern Italy location.

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Embracing the spirit, if not the letter of Aciman's novel, Guadagnino and co-writers Walter Fasano and James Ivory (of the Merchant Ivory dynasty that brought us "Maurice" and "A Room With a View") have resituated the action ever so slightly to Lombardy. The film takes place at the Perlmans' vacation home, a spacious old villa not unlike the one seen in the Patricia Highsmith-esque, Guadagnino-produced short "Diarchy." Every summer, Elio's professor father (Michael Stuhlbarg) hires a promising young doctoral student to assist with his research. This year, the Jewish family's house guest is a 24-year-old golden boy of the kind that might once have graced the pages of Physique Pictorial magazine.

Oliver's arrival stirs something in Elio, though the teen is slow to confront his feelings. On one hand, he's compelled to spend as much time with the newcomer as possible, serving as his guide on bike rides to town and frequent trips to the local swimming hole. At the same time, he's protective of his own feelings, unsure how to read Oliver's casual American attitude (the way his hand caresses Elio's shoulder, or the aloof "Later" with which he signs off every conversation).

Though viewers are sure to read much into the strange chemistry taking shape between Elio and Oliver, Guadagnino concentrates his attention on the surface: a freshly prepared Italian breakfast, tree branches heavy with ripe fruit, the glowing sun on honeyed skin. But even as he indulges our senses with such details, the subtext becomes impossible to ignore.

Though Elio and his family have spent many a summer in Lombardy, something is different about this one — that much is clear in the way Elio interacts with longtime girlfriend Marzia (Esther Garrel). They've known each other since childhood and are so comfortable around one another, it seems a logical next step that they might choose to lose their virginity with one another. But Elio holds back

temporarily, bragging to Oliver that he and Marzia could have had sex after a late-night swim, just to see what kind of reaction it gets.

Oliver is interested, but is clearly wary of acting on his desires, since Elio is not only inexperienced, but also his boss' son. This seductive outsider correctly anticipates that anything physical that might happen between him and Elio will have a lasting impact on the young man's sexual identity. And yet, the pair brazenly peacock for one another, parading around shirtless and leaving the doors to their shared bathroom ajar — an improvised mating ritual echoed by a low insect buzz that fills the soundtrack.

As played by Hammer, Oliver is the smoldering embodiment of cocky self-confidence, and yet, there's an endearing vulnerability in the way he needs for Elio to make the first move — setting the tempo for the deliciously tentative courtship dance between them. Meanwhile, relative newcomer Chalamet combines the intellectual precocity and hot-blooded animal energy of a young Louis Garrel, circa "the Dreamers," distinguishing himself via the character's mastery of three languages (English, French, and Italian) and two musical instruments (guitar and piano).

As Elio and Oliver's attraction become more brazen, the question remains how much of their "special friendship" registers with Elio's parents. The boy's mother (Amira Casar) certainly picks up on the impact Oliver has had on her son, even going so far as to suggest that the two spend a few days alone together before Oliver ships off to New Jersey. As for Elio's father, Guadagnino has done justice to one of the book's key passages, crafting an exquisite scene in which Stuhlbarg's character bares his soul via a terrific monologue delivered after the boy returns home — putting to rest a question subtly raised earlier in the film, when a homoerotic slide show doubles as a hesitant proposition of sorts.

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No matter how intellectually progressive the Perlman family is, no father has ever said something so open-minded and eloquent to his son, and yet, the film offers this conversation as a gift to audiences who might have desperately needed to hear it in their own lives. This splendid conversation makes such an impact, the film could have ended there (the novel follows the characters for years more), though Guadagnino does supply a bittersweet coda that implies how the two leads look back on that summer — further suggesting that the film isn't a literal rendering of Elio's experience, but a bittersweet embellishment of his memory. These were the days that shaped him, marked by the intense tastes, textures, and odors that Guadagnino so effectively amplifies for the viewer's benefit.

Back in Italy, some critics have held Guadagnino's work in advertising and brand promotions against him, whereas here in the States, audiences hold no such grudges, responding instead to the director's cinematic virtuosity. Even as he beguiles us with mystery, Guadagnino recreates Elio's life-changing summer with such intensity that we might as well be experiencing it first-hand. It's a rare gift that earns him a place in the pantheon alongside such masters of sensuality as Pedro Amodóvar and François Ozon, while putting "Call Me by Your Name" on par with the best of their work.

34 COMMENTS

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Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (Premieres), Jan. 22, 2017. Running time: 132 MIN.

Production: A Sony Pictures Classics release of a RT Features, Frenesy Film Co., La Cinéfacture production. (International sales: Memento Films, Paris.) Producers: Peter Spears, Luca Guadagnino, Emilie Georges, Rodrigo Teixeira, Marco Morabito. Executive producers: James Ivory, Howard Rosenman, Tom Dolby, Naima Abed, Nicholas Kaiser, Lourenço Sant'Anna, Sophie Mas, Francesco Melzi d'Eril, Derek Simonds, Margarethe Baillou.

Crew: Director: Luca Guadagnino. Screenplay, James Ivory, Guadagnino, Walter Fasano. Camera (color, widescreen): Sayombhu Mukdeeprom. Editor: Walter Fasano. Music: Sufjan Stevens.

With: Armie Hammer, Timothée Chalamet, Michael Stuhlbarg, Amira Casar, Esther Garrel, Victoire Du Bois, Vanda Capriolo, Antonio Rimoldi, Elena Bucci, Marco Sgrosso.

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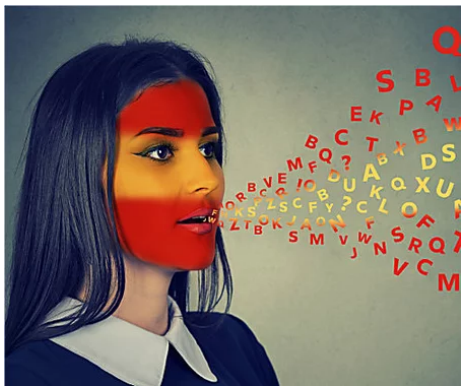

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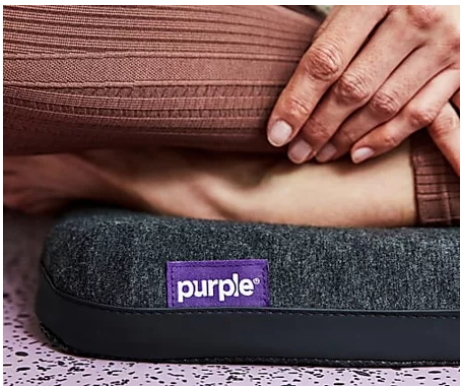

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