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Call Me by Your Name': A Love Story Fueled by Strangers' Chemistry

By Cara Buckley

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WEST HOLLYWOOD, Calif. — "You'll be meeting in the man cave," the publicist said, pushing open the door to the ground floor of a villa set in the lush gardens of the Sunset Marquis.

Previous hotel guests have included members of Aerosmith, Guns N' Roses and Metallica, and while they might never have visited the man cave, it seemed to bear homage to them, or to hair metal, or to hetero teenage boys, or to something. It had a pool table, a guitar, plenty of booze, a framed print of a nude body-painted woman, and another of a skull enveloped in flames. Darkened windows kept out the California sun.

By any measure, it was a curious spot to interview Timothée Chalamet and Armie Hammer, the stars of "Call Me by Your Name," due Nov. 24, a heartbreaking coming-of-age story about two young men who fall in love during an idyllic sunlit Italian summer decades ago.

Arriving at the cave moments later, Mr. Chalamet and Mr. Hammer took in the décor with a few chortles, and then Mr. Hammer beelined to the guitar and began strumming, as Mr. Chalamet threw himself onto a big L-shaped couch. The pair have fallen into an easy camaraderie that extends most places they go. For a good chunk of the film's shoot last year in northern Italy, and in the days leading up to it, they were often the only ones who spoke English, which helped them forge a connection that crackles through their scenes. They have also been promoting the film together, on and off, since its triumphant premiere earlier this year at Sundance, where it sent festivalgoers into a swoon.

"It's gotten to the point," Mr. Hammer said, "where we finish each others' ——"

"—— sentences," Mr. Chalamet chimed in.

"Sandwiches," Mr. Hammer replied.

In the film, which is based on the 2007 novel of the same title by André Aciman, Mr. Chalamet plays Elio, a whipsmart 17-year-old American-Italian who lives with his family in an Italian villa, and Mr. Hammer plays Oliver, a 24-year-old American graduate student who arrives to intern with Elio's professor father for the summer. Elio is immediately intrigued by Oliver, and soon finds himself torturously in love, and fruitlessly trying to fight it, at least at first. Set in 1983, and directed by Luca Guadagnino, whose previous films include last year's "A Bigger Splash" and "I Am Love" (2010), the film is languid and intoxicating, a visual feast of dappled light, polo shirts and era-appropriate songs, from the Psychedelic Furs and the soundtrack to "Flashdance."

Mr. Guadagnino is a master at hitting all five senses, which is one of the reasons critics have warmly embraced the film.

"It is more a terrarium of human experience, a sensory immersion that is remarkably full in its vision," Richard Lawson wrote in Vanity Fair. He continued, "Each shot is busy with existence, but Guadagnino does not overwhelm."

What also makes the story quietly remarkable, especially for a film that has traction in the awards race, is that it is simply about two young men who fall for each other, without menacing rednecks wanting to pulverize them or a ravaging disease lurking in wait. "It's just a love story, and it's really humanizing," Mr. Hammer said. "No one gets beat up, no one gets sick, no one has to pay for being gay."

Though the lovers' age difference has drawn some attention, the film has largely been a source of deep gratification for its key players. It represents a return to the screen for James Ivory, 89, who wrote the screenplay with echoes of his 1987 love story, "Maurice." It is making a name for Mr. Chalamet, who is 21 and strongly tipped for an Oscar nomination. And for Mr. Hammer, 31, the time spent making the film in Italy was, he said, "the most transformative experience" of his professional life.

"I've never experienced total immersion like that," Mr. Hammer said. "I've never experienced a sense of safety like that. I've never experienced a sense of making yourself so accessible and vulnerable." He added, "It opened my eyes to a whole new sense of understanding, and life, and what it is to be human."

He and Mr. Chalamet were cast separately and did not set eyes on each other until they met in Italy, on the set. Mr. Guadagnino said he felt so deeply connected to each actor individually "that I took it for granted they must have a great connection too."

Mr. Guadagnino found Mr. Chalamet "ingenious," ambitious and intent on challenging himself in roles, he said, adding, "He never goes for the easy way. He goes the very complicated way." And the director had been angling to work with Mr. Hammer since the actor appeared as the Winklevoss twins in "The Social Network" in 2010. "He carries a sense of infectious seductiveness to him, and a

buoyancy, and a beauty," Mr. Guadagnino said. "But it is also intertwined with a very beautiful internal turmoil."

He was proved right with the actors' chemistry — their characters' attraction is shot through with a fraught competitiveness — even though Mr. Chalamet and Mr. Hammer are as strikingly different in person as they are onscreen.

"It was the luck of the universe, or something, that there was just a natural bond as humans," Mr. Chalamet said.

Mr. Chalamet is slight and pale, a bundle of boyish energy and birdlike alertness, with a delicate face topped by a black tumble of curls. He grew up in Hell's Kitchen, the son of a former Broadway dancer and a French editor, attended LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, and appeared in "Homeland," "Interstellar" and the Off Broadway play "Prodigal Son."

Mr. Hammer is 6-foot-5, with Ken-doll features ("the textbook guy for shaving-cream commercial looks," noted GQ), a sardonic mien, and a voice that booms with assuredness and authority. His great-grandfather was an oil tycoon, and he grew up in the Cayman Islands and Los Angeles. He said he wanted to be an actor after seeing "Home Alone," when he was 12.

Mr. Chalamet, who also appears in Greta Gerwig's new film, "Lady Bird," said he was drawn to the role because it felt like "an honest look into a young person's existence."

"Nobody knows me," he said, with a laugh, "so it didn't feel like too much of a risk because it didn't feel like my performance in this sort of piece of work was being compared to anything else."

Mr. Hammer had greater trepidation, and was not sure if he was good enough for such a stripped-down, emotionally honest film, with no set pieces or special effects. "This movie lives and dies in the moments between these characters," he said. There was also a lot of nudity in the original script, though it was revised, and Mr. Hammer, somehow, had never done a sex scene.

He is also a relative newcomer to smaller-budget films. After his appearance in "The Social Network," he landed major roles in movies like "The Lone Ranger" (2013) and "The Man from U.N.C.L.E." (2015). But Mr. Hammer found the box-office expectations stifling and the Hollywood machine depressing. "It was like, 'He's tall, he's conventionally handsome, so let's put him in these big movies and try to build this brand,'" he said, "and it just didn't work."

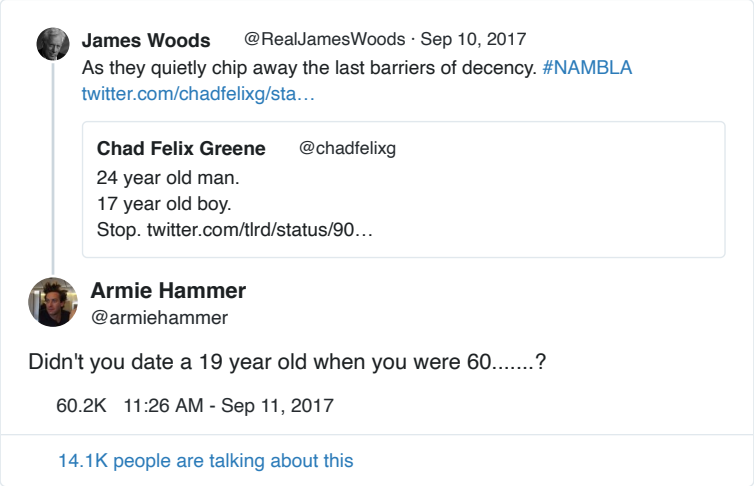


Mr. Hammer, left, and Mr. Chalamet in "Call Me by Your Name." Mr. Hammer feared he wasn't good enough for such an emotionally honest film. Mr. Chalamet said, "Nobody knows me, so it didn't feel like too much of a risk." Sony Pictures Classics

He resolved to make smaller films, and his first one was last year's "The Birth of a Nation," which ended up being bittersweet for him, too. The drama, about Nat Turner's slave rebellion, sold for a record $17 million at Sundance, but was engulfed in controversy after decades-old rape allegations against the filmmaker and star, Nate Parker, emerged. It was a crushing experience that Mr. Hammer said he was still recovering from.

"It seemed clear-cut to me that there was a lot of atoning and apologizing that needed to happen that just didn't," Mr. Hammer said, his voice catching. "And that was really tough because we watched this movie that we did, that we all felt was important, just kind of drift away." (The film's fall did not dent his career, and while promoting "Call Me," Mr. Hammer was also filming "On the Basis of Sex," a movie starring Felicity Jones as Ruth Bader Ginsburg.)

In the meantime, both men say they have been relishing promoting this film, even if some reactions come from left field, like a tweet by the actor James Woods suggesting the age difference between the characters was pedophilic. “Didn’t you date a 19-year-old when you were 60?” Mr. Hammer wrote back, in a tweet that went viral, to his great surprise. (Mr. Woods began dating a 19-year-old when he was 59.)



“I didn’t think anybody really cared what I said, I didn’t think anybody cared what James Woods said, you know?” Mr. Hammer said.

Mr. Guadagnino said any chatter about the age difference amounted to an “artificial topic.” No one took issue with the age difference in the 1987 film “Dirty Dancing,” he pointed out, where Jennifer Grey was playing a 17-year-old and Patrick Swayze’s character was 24. Also in “Call Me,” he said, it is Elio who goes after Oliver. “The person who chases is 17,” he said.

Mr. Hammer recalled another surprising reaction. “Someone mentioned to me: ‘Timothée has to put his hand on your crotch in the movie. How did that feel?’ And I was like, do you ask every woman in a movie how it is to have her ass slapped, or her boobs fondled? It’s that double standard kind of thing.”

Mr. Chalamet interjected, “I’ve been very encouraged by the nature of the conversations that I’ve had, and by the lack of questions that are tunnel-visioned in their understanding of sexuality and life and love.”

Mr. Hammer said, “Because the reality is, Timmy grabs my crotch all the time.”

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