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Review: A Boy's Own Desire in 'Call Me by Your Name'

Call Me by Your Name NYT Critic's Pick | Directed by Luca Guadagnino | Drama, Romance | R | 2h 12m

By Manohla Dargis

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You don't just watch Luca Guadagnino's movies, you swoon into them. His best-known titles, "I Am Love" and "A Bigger Splash," feature beautiful people with impeccable taste experiencing haute-bourgeois life intensely. Passion and drama upend those lives, but what's most striking about these movies is their extraordinary palpable quality. In Mr. Guadagnino's work, passion and drama are expressed in words, deeds and surging music but also in the vibrant, visceral textures that envelop his characters — the cool marble, succulent fruit, shadow and light, sheens of sweat. These are movies that turn your gaze into near-touch, inviting you to see and almost caress their sun-warmed bodies.

Mr. Guadagnino's latest, "Call Me by Your Name," is another ravishment of the senses, though this time there's a strong narrative tethering all the churning feelings and sensuous surfaces. Like the 2007 novel by André Aciman on which it's based, the story turns on an affair between Elio Perlman (Timothée Chalamet), a coltish 17-year-old American-Italian, and Oliver (Armie Hammer), an American in his 20s. Elio lives with his father (a tremendous Michael Stuhlbarg) and mother (Amira Casar) in a villa in northern Italy. Each summer the father, a professor of Greco-Roman culture, invites a student to work with him and stay with his family; this year it's Oliver who moves in.

Elio and Oliver's affair begins slowly with each circling the other at a distance, conveying the kind of nonchalance that's a shield for interest. Oliver proves far better at this part of the game; he knows more than to look too long and too hard. Elio's furtive, ducking glances, by contrast, tend to linger, hovering in the air like questions. He's increasingly curious about this new guest, but soon inexplicably (to Elio, at least) irked by him as well, leading Elio to complain to his parents about Oliver's standard signoff ("later"). But when Elio scribbles a private rebuke in a notebook, chastising himself for responding harshly toward Oliver, it's as if he were writing an apologetic love letter.

Mr. Guadagnino is very good at catching the indolent drift of long summer days, with their sleepiness and bared limbs. Everyone seems to move in slow motion at the villa, except perhaps the family's hard-working maid. This languor fits the tempo of Elio and Oliver's relationship, which evolves over meals, drowsy idylls, a little work and a spontaneous piano recital that becomes an overture to seduction. A gifted musician, Elio easily moves from piano to guitar (much as his family shifts from speaking Italian to French to English), talent that makes him seem at one with the villa's miles of bookshelves, its velvet sofas, scattered Oriental rugs and tastefully arranged antiques.



A spontaneous piano recital: Mr. Hammer, left, and Mr. Chalamet. Sony Pictures Classics

It's an alluring milieu — charming, civilized and perfectly, if a shade too flawlessly, arranged. Here, even a busy breakfast table and the fruit on a tree can seem art directed. Mr. Guadagnino almost can't help making everything look intoxicating, yet he also makes you believe in this family's reality. The grand piano isn't for show and neither are the books or the open affection and respect with which Elio and his parents treat one another. (The movie reminds you how rarely characters read for pleasure, much less listen to classical music.) "Call Me by Your Name" is set in 1983, so no one is staring into a smartphone. And the time frame means that AIDS doesn't figure in the story, though there's a suggestion that the closet does.

The story primarily unfolds through Elio's point of view. The restless camera tags alongside him, showing you what he sees, his erotic reveries and yearning. And it's Elio who initiates the affair, at least overtly, though Oliver later admits to playing his part in what the story frames as a mutual seduction. Mr. Guadagnino avoids directly engaging the difference in Elio and Oliver's ages, which might have forced him to explore the underside of his sumptuous surfaces to greater, messier effect. Instead, Mr. Guadagnino leans on beauty, as when Elio's father poetically speaks to an increasingly agitated Oliver about the "ageless ambiguity" of some male statues ("as if they're daring you to desire them").

Written by James Ivory (the director of films like "Maurice"), "Call Me by Your Name" progresses through evasions and encounters, with Elio advancing, Oliver receding and their circling narrowing. The two don't (can't, won't) always say what they mean. So Mr. Guadagnino speaks for them by eroticizing their world, making desire visible in the luxuriousness of the setting, in the green enveloping the villa, the gushing waters of a pool and the graceful lines of male statues. When Oliver hungrily eats a soft-boiled egg, cracking the shell and causing the yolk to messily spurt, Mr. Guadagnino's lyricism slides into comedy; it's hard to know just how self-mocking the moment is meant to be.

Even so, the lyricism seduces as does fragile, ecstatic Elio. "Call Me by Your Name" is less a coming-of-age story, a tale of innocence and loss, than one about coming into sensibility. In that way, it is about the creation of a new man who, the story suggests, is liberated by pleasure that doesn't necessarily establish sexual identity. It's important that Elio and Oliver have relationships with women, though for seemingly different reasons: the overheated Elio sleeps with a girlfriend (Esther Garrel), while Oliver carries on a more performative affair with a local (Victoire Du Bois). The women are not treated with much kindness, but these affairs further complicate the movie's vision of pleasure's fluidity.

There are moments when Mr. Guadagnino's visual choices seem unintentionally in competition with the quieter, intricate emotions that his actors put across so movingly. He can be discreet to the point of coyness (bodies sweat but don't necessarily grunt), but it is finally the insistent delicacy and depth of emotion that makes these characters so heart-skippingly tender. The charismatic Mr. Chalamet, Mr. Hammer and Mr. Stuhlbarg — whose brilliant delivery of a tricky speech pierces the heart and, crucially, the movie's lustrous patina — transform beauty into feeling. In one alive, vulnerable and life-altering summer, Elio's desire finds its purpose. He loves, and in loving, he becomes.

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