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New York Film Festival #4: Peeking In On "Call Me By Your Name" and "Voyeur"

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CALL ME BY YOUR NAME ** 1/2 out of ****

VOYEUR ** out of ****

The final weekend of the 55th New York Film Festival is upon us and it's time to deal with the movie I anticipated the most: *Call Me By Your Name*. Director Luca Guadagnino blew me away with the literally operatic drama *I Am Love*, which has a jaw-dropping finale I still remember with pleasure. What would he do with André Aciman's novel *Call Me By Your Name*, the acclaimed story of romantic, bittersweet first love. Glibly, one might compare it the film *Summer of '42*, the sentimental story of a 15 year old boy's initiation into the wonders of intimacy by a 22 year old war widow. In this case, it's the summer of '88, the young man is 17 and his intense desire is fixated on a 24 year old grad student named Oliver.

A better comparison is *Maurice*, the Merchant-Ivory film based on the E.M. Forster novel and released in theaters the year before this story is set. (It's almost certain our two main characters saw it.) Both feature two young men grappling (perhaps) with the idea that they might be gay and considering the risks that entails. In Forster's time the risks were immense, beginning with jail. He couldn't even imagine such a novel being published until after he died. In 1988, society still in great measure disapproved (and the here-unspoken spectre of AIDS was blooming). People might still choose to ignore desire for a "safer" life. Both films were scripted by James Ivory and it's easy to parallel their tales: one man choosing to be brave and seeing an almost impossibly promising future loom ahead while the other seemingly dooms himself to a constricted, passionless existence and wondering what might have been.

I'm getting ahead of myself. The novel answers all our questions about these two men while the film stays firmly in the present tense. It begins and ends in the summer of 1988 when our hero Elio (Timothée Chalamet) is drawn to the impossibly handsome and seemingly indifferent American Oliver (Armie Hammer). After striving to be equally indifferent in a nonchalant, casual, no-I-wasn't-looking-at-your-impossibly-gorgeous-body sort of way, Elio is relieved and thrilled to discover Oliver wants him too...or at least might be willing to relieve Elio of his gay virginity. (A local girl is on hand for the straight portion of Elio's education.)

Call Me By Your Name is beautifully shot, oddly scored, nicely acted and does things to fruit that *Summer of '42* (and even *Maurice*) never imagined. I found it deeply frustrating.

Why did the film frustrate me so? I actually didn't read the novel until after I saw the movie so it wasn't because I felt the movie missed something in the book. (Though I think it did.) A movie is its own beast. But I watched the movie and I had no idea what was going on, really. The precious 17 year old Elio watches with boredom for the arrival of that summer's grad student, some boring college student who would help the kid's dad with work while pursuing their own studies. Elio is almost annoyingly erudite — he speaks and reads multiple languages, plays the piano and guitar with fluidity and thanks to being raised in a hothouse of academic sophistication can weigh in on any topic with flippant ease.

But the new arrival is American and handsome...and cold. While Elio is probably used to having people fawn over this coltish, handsome prodigy, this Oliver guy won't give him the time of day. "Later," he says abruptly in the rude way of Americans, something everyone else finds charming because Oliver is after all charming personified but which Elio finds annoying. Does Elio mind not being the center of attention? Does Oliver really mean to be so dismissive or is it just a clash of cultures?

Let's be clear: I knew the story involved romance and attraction between the two. But for the first third of the film, perhaps, there was nothing. I was admiring the film's refusal to be coy. Elio doesn't cast longing glances at Oliver, the camera doesn't swoon over this blonde god nor especially fetishize Elio's beauty either. Is it a missed signal when Oliver almost bizarrely starts to massage Elio's back in front of everyone, a moment that

like so much else in the film seems opaque? It's not that I needed labels on these two, that I was impatiently waiting to know if either was gay or bi or straight but horny. Maybe they didn't know themselves, after all.

What I found lacking was any sense of Elio and Oliver wondering and wrestling with these thoughts too. I didn't need answers but I did need to see them pondering the question. I didn't. Not for a second. I didn't sense this in their performances or the performances of the people around them or the way the scenes were framed and shot or anything. The score by Sufjan Stevens (one of my favorite recording artists) was especially confounding: a musical theme would develop and then suddenly disappear, as if someone had turned off the stereo. Both men flirt and have sex with women and I didn't know if they were killing time or happily bisexual or blithely unaware they might want to explore something new. What the heck was up?

Suddenly, quite a ways into the film Elio enters Oliver's room, finds his swimming trunks, breathes them in, inhales deeply, puts them over his face and then almost uncontrollably positions himself on Oliver's bed in a manner that leaves no doubt about what he wants and how he wants it. It was almost comically porn-ish in manner but at least it cleared up where Elio stood in the matter.

So instead of a film about simmering desire, resistance, lust, regret, pleasure, pain and more desire, I was seeing a film that for much of its time seemed to be avoiding the issue at hand. Finally we had some physical intimacy between the two. Some intriguing scenes follow, such as one with Elio crying after sex and yet essentially not regretting it in any way. But still I wondered what we were seeing. A 24 year old indifferently or happily or kindly making love to his host's son and then moving on? Or the beginning of real romance?

SPOILER ALERT

I simply couldn't tell until the film sent them off on a trip to Rome. Now they would be truly alone and able to reveal themselves to one another. All desire would be laid bare. Either the passion would run cold without the delicious need to keep it private or it might blossom or peter out but by god we would see what Elio and Oliver mean to each other.

Except we don't. They head to Rome and the film becomes positively demure. They're clearly having fun, racing down streets, drinking, kissing in alleyways. But then Oliver wanders off to dance with a girl to the summer's hit song ("Love My Way" by Psychedelic Furs) and Elio throws up and they part. Oliver looks sad and rueful but it's still unclear if he is just awkward about awakening such passion in Elio and then bolting or is distraught over leaving behind his one true love.

When Elio returns home, we get the 1988 equivalent to the fairy tale ending of *Maurice* in which an aristocrat heads off into the sunset with his lower class lover. Here, Elio is showered with compassion and understanding by his father (Michael Stuhlbarg). In a scene of almost unparalleled progressiveness, the dad tells Elio how lucky the boy is to have had such a marvelous relationship with Oliver, intimates he is fully aware they've known each other carnally (!) — though we've had virtually no hint most others suspected what was going on, except for one sly bit of awareness from the mom. He not only blesses what they had but shyly

admits he once had such passionate true love but let it slip away. (It's unclear if the dad means with another man, but that's certainly the impression.)

In a bold final scene, Oliver calls from America to tell everyone he's getting married to his girlfriend and Elio stares quietly into the fireplace while the credits roll, literally taking in all that has happened to him and the sense that the first great love of his life will come to naught and what this might mean to him in the future. I walked out and still didn't know what to make of it all. Was Oliver just being true to himself or was he too afraid to accept that the love of his life might just be a 17 year old boy?

END OF SPOILERS

My sense of dislocation was thrown off from start to finish by everyone's attitude towards Elio. When Elio explains what battle a local monument commemorates, Oliver says almost with exasperation, "Is there anything you don't know?" Um, well, it's a gigantic monument in the middle of the town square and surely there's a plaque and Elio has passed it a thousand times. It would be bizarre if he didn't know this particular fact. But still I was confounded.

In the same way, Oliver reads out loud a few lines from the academic paper he's working on and asks Elio if it isn't the biggest piece of junk Elio has ever heard. Elio responds that maybe Oliver believed it when he wrote it. Oliver treats this banal pronouncement as manna from heaven. Was Oliver romanticizing Elio's sophistication to justify his own desire to have sex with this kid and not worry about whether Elio was ready for it? Or was Elio actually supposed to be some wunderkind rather than annoyingly precocious in a few areas, tossing back scraps of knowledge he heard at the dinner table?

Why am I at the end of the film, still wondering about the most basic facts of the story and these characters and their relationship to one another. I don't mean, "Is Elio gay?" I mean, what does Elio believe about himself? I think I know but I couldn't swear.

Then I read Aciman's excellent novel and all questions were answered. Or at least I knew what was going on in the novel that Ivory adapted. Here Elio is burning with intense desire for Oliver from start to finish. He sleeps with a girl but he can barely remember to meet her for more sex when she's more than ready. It is his obsession with Oliver that fills every waking moment...and every sleeping moment as well. Oliver's intense physical and emotional desire for Elio ultimately becomes clear as well. This isn't a young man's initiation into sex or a bittersweet memory of first love. This is that rare meeting of two souls, a true and perfect love that was squandered by Oliver and would never be matched for the rest of their lives. Even if the novel hadn't jumped years and then decades into the future, I knew who these two characters were and what they meant to each other. Everything I yearned for in the movie was beautifully captured in the book.

Maybe I was reviewing the film I expected or wanted more than the movie Guadagnino made. That happens. But it's a tamped down, opaque movie and ultimately frustrating. The (mostly) straight drama *I Am Love* is a lot gayer than *Call Me By Your Name*. Yet, I kept thinking about the movie and the oddly truncated usage of the

score (Two songs by Sufjan Stevens are also in the film — perhaps I'm too hyper-aware of him as an artist of today but they felt a tad out of place and didn't thrill me.) It says something about the movie that I couldn't quite shake it. I want to see it again. I imagine my every reservation will be confirmed or even strengthened, but who knows? Finding out for sure is what second dates are for.

VOYEUR ** out of ****

This documentary film follows journalist Gay Talese on what might well be his last big “get” — a splashy New Yorker excerpt followed by the publication of yet another nonfiction blockbuster. At least, that was the plan. Talese's project focused on a voyeur, the preferred name for the lifelong obsession of Gerald Foos, a guy who bought a motel in Colorado in the mid-1960s precisely so he could spy on the guests in their rooms. Foos built a crawl space and used specially installed vents to serve as innocuous peepholes. He watched guests and took meticulous notes about their activities for decades. He watched them undress and make love or fight or cry or just watch tv or read and even those boring moments somehow held a charge when you observed them unawares. At least, that was what he told Talese.

Filmmakers Myles Kane & Josh Koury surely started this film merely to get a glimpse at Talese in action. A trailblazer in journalism, Talese wrote famed articles on Frank Sinatra and Joe DiMaggio still studied and anthologized to this day. He ventured into nonfiction books, acclaimed works that documented the building of a bridge in New York City or the inner workings of the New York Times. But he became an honest to goodness celebrity with his explorations of the mob (*Honor Thy Father*) and swingers (*Thy Neighbor's Wife*). Yes, sex and violence sell.

It has been a long, long time since those books and since then Talese has surely delivered notable articles and such, I assume, but no works with the same impact, other than a memoir and collections of his pieces. So *The Voyeur's Motel* was hotly anticipated; so Kane & Koury's desire to film the buildup to the book's release was understandable. How could they know it would all collapse in flames? How could they imagine Talese's final grand work would become riddled with questions and fact errors and be disowned by Talese himself until he recanted his recanting and defended the work all over again?

The imbroglio made national headlines and the film was there to capture it. It's a pity *Voyeur* seems caught between two worlds, the benign intent of the project (as I imagine it began) and the unraveling of a legend — or at best the revelation that an elderly Talese doesn't have it any more as a journalist. The film is polite but cutting by the end as it slyly draws sad parallels between Talese and the tale spinner Foos. But it takes too long to get there, for even as the project unravels they merely capture Talese flailing away rather than asking some of the obvious questions that must be asked.

Here's the gist. When Talese became so famous he was appearing on Phil Donahue's talk show, it was to promote *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, a book about the swingers culture which Talese insisted he was honor-bound to take part in if he was going to report on it accurately. Never mind that he was married and had children and never insisted he couldn't report on the Mafia without swearing a blood oath and rubbing out a competitor. Talese said he *had* to swing and swing he did, documenting it along with all the other salacious goings-on he witnessed. He's still a brand name talent more than 30 years later but the notable lack of serious works of nonfiction since then seems to indicate he paid a price for that, something not really addressed here.

During all the press for that book, he was contacted by Gerald Foos, a guy who said, "Have I got a story for you!" Talese got in touch and eventually went out to meet this curiously proud Peeping Tom. (Foos liked to imagine his obsessive note-keeping turned this illegal spying into some sort of scientific enterprise.) Foos took him to the hotel, led him up into the crawl space, spied on people with Talese by his side and shared his voluminous journals. By God, Talese thought, this guy really had spent decades spying on people!

They communicated over the years, with Foos always reluctant to go public, if only for legal reasons. Finally, long after he'd sold the hotel and imagined the statute of limitations had passed, he was ready. As Talese put it, one of them was going to die eventually so it was now or never. And so this film. Talese is seen meeting with the *New Yorker* about how to present the story, going through the wringer with its famed fact checking department, preparing for the imminent release of the book tied into the cover story and preparations for all the media to follow. After 35 years of relative silence, Talese had one more chance to wow them all and remind the world of who he was. Then the facts started to unravel.

This film doesn't do anything other documentary films haven't in the wake of trailblazing by Errol Morris and others. There's nothing wrong with building a scale model of the motel and filming Foos as he lifts off the roof and peeps inside, a giant and intimidating figure. Hearing Foos and his wife admit Talese always insists they dress up when he visits is certainly a fascinating look into Talese and the art of window dressing a subject

you're filming. (Did he do it for the cameras or because he saw himself as important and wanted to be around people who aspired to his standards of dress too?) And yet, the artificiality annoyed me since it wasn't married to getting a deeper reality onto film or telling the story they had more clearly.

I'd read about the voyeur when it happened and as a former fact checker myself, was especially intrigued to get more insight into how this fiasco happened. Annoyingly, I feel like I'd have to go back and read the articles again to figure that out. Watching the film, I'm left with more questions than answers. We discover that the hotel was purchased in 1969, not 1966...but Foos has journals that start in 1966, journals that detail precisely what he witnessed night after night. Clearly, they're forged which calls into question all the journals. But Talese insanely explains this away by saying Foos might have just accidentally flipped the 9 into a 6. Ok, maybe. Once. But he got the year wrong every day for three years — in 1966, 1967 and 1968? Years in which *he had no hotel to spy in.*

We discover Foos didn't even SELL the hotel when he said. We discover that Foos's extraordinary claim to have witnessed a murder doesn't hold up in the least. And yet, Talese angrily insists this can all be explained as well. He's furious when he imagines the filmmakers "setting up" Foos by repeating a question they'd asked him when he was alone and not facing Talese. Foos is furious when Talese casually mentions a valuable cache of baseball cards. (Someone could come rob him!)

Instead of one last hurrah, we see Talese laid bare as more like Foos than he would imagine. Both keep archives overflowing with material — Foos has literally millions of baseball cards and other memorabilia; Talese has boxes and boxes of research material. Both are storytellers. Both seem out of their depth in the modern world, with Talese flabbergasted by technology like Google Earth or the rudiments of online research. Foos is overwhelmed by the media attention and notoriety he's been craving. Both see their world close in around them. It's a poignant and damning comparison for a writer whose best work has endured and will continue to do so.

But when it comes to this behind the scenes peek into a book launch turning into a Titanic-like disaster, *Voyeur* is too polite to probe, too timid to ask hard questions. Just when we want to move in closer, *Voyeur* demurely looks away.

NYFF #1: The Rider, Arthur Miller: Writer, The Other Side of Hope

NYFF #2: The Florida Project, BPM

NYFF #3: Wonderstruck, Last Flag Flying

NYFF #4: Call Me By Your Name, Voyeur

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