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La La Land: A Musical For Everyone

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Marta Vander Top

Leading up to the Academy Awards on February 26, we will be featuring reviews on some of the movies that were nominated in the “Best Picture” category. Return to iAt throughout this week to read more reviews. And, if you have watched the movies, give us your own movie review by leaving a comment.

As a self-proclaimed “movie snob,” I treat the Oscars like most people treat the Superbowl. I host parties, laugh, cry, and cheer throughout the night. As I was doing research getting ready for my favorite Sunday of the year, I went to see *La La Land* with a group of friends; within the first few minutes I was automatically hooked. I fell so in love with this movie that I went back to see it a second (okay, and a third) time. This love story between Mia ([Emma Stone](#)) and Sebastian ([Ryan Gosling](#)), two aspiring artists trying to make it in Hollywood, is a film that will not be forgotten. [Damien Chazelle](#) followed up his previous film *Whiplash* with a film that won seven Golden Globes and has recording fourteen Oscar nominations.

This movie is full of secrets and shocks that make it great: the fact that Ryan Gosling learned piano from scratch to play each take live, the long sweeping shots that appear to occur in one take, a dance number that was filmed on the hottest day of the California summer that shut down an entire exit ramp ... but I think the simplicity of this film is what makes it brilliant. It’s nostalgic, it’s vibrant, and it’s for all of us.

It’s nostalgic

There are several obvious nods to old Hollywood movies. Mia walks past a mural full of cinematic legends such as Marilyn Monroe, Charlie Chaplin, Shirley Temple, W.C. Fields, and James Dean.¹ She has a mural of Ingrid Bergman from *Casablanca* (1942), and even shows Sebastian the window that Bergman and Bogart peer out of in the film. Sebastian takes Mia to see *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955).

As Mia dances around her apartment with her roommates, I was reminded of how Maria teases her friends in the bridal shop in *West Side Story* (1961). In the dance Mia and Sebastian’s not-love-song and dance “A Lovely Night” instantly reminded me of “People Will Say We’re in Love” from *Oklahoma!* (1955) and *Singin’ In The Rain* (1952).

This is just the short list. I am by no means an expert on films, especially Old Hollywood films, but even I couldn’t help but notice this salute to movies gone by. The way it is filmed makes you stop and think “Wait, does this film take place in the 1950s or present day?” and it is done seamlessly and beautifully.

It’s vibrant.

It is absolutely impossible to see this movie without noticing the colors. Mia’s world is full of vibrancy and extreme pops of color; everything Sebastian owns is muted and dull. Mia’s life is full of hope and possibility; she will do anything to get noticed. She auditions for role after role, hoping to “make it,” whatever “making it means.” All she wants is to be noticed. Meanwhile, Sebastian has one goal: he wants to open a jazz club at his favorite place that was unfortunately turned into a samba/tapas place. As the two fall in love, they begin to change each other. Her wardrobe tones down, his apartment gets a facelift, and together they begin to share their strengths with the other.

You could take a screenshot of this movie at any given moment and it would be stunning. In almost every single scene, all three primary colors (red, blue, and yellow) are prevalent, and it is incredibly intentional if the colors are missing. As this film explores the building blocks of jazz and film, it does so by using the building blocks of color.

It’s for all of us.

A criticism of the movie is that it is a film about Hollywood for Hollywood; just one more way for the industry to gloat about themselves. However, the film is more than that.

Most of us can relate to needing to work at a coffee shop (and having customers yell at you for serving them a muffin that wasn't gluten free) or needing to play cliché '80s music at a pool party just so that you don't need to ask your family *again* for help paying your utility bill. Whether you're in this stage now, or you're looking back after having "made it," each of us can empathize with the characters.

We wrestle with compromise, and what it means to be in love and follow your dreams. Mia tells Sebastian that "People love what other people are passionate about," but he simply responds, "Not in my experience." Especially those who are in the creative business asks how they can "be themselves" while still being authentically themselves. Thoughts of self-doubt and anxiety cause us to ask, "What if I'm not enough? What if I'm good enough?" are responded to by one of the musical's anthem "City of Stars."

"It's love ... that's all we're looking for—is love from someone else." The core of this movie is love: love for vocation, talents, location, art, and other people. At the end of the day, this is a movie made up of the basics: primary colors, ordinary singers, real location shoots around the city of Los Angeles. Even if you're not a self-proclaimed musical lover, this film as a story that is compelling for anyone to grasp onto. We all are searching for answers to which only love can give answers, and it doesn't have to be romantic love. We are all looking for a place to belong, and sometimes that feels so far away and distant, we're dreaming of a fairy tale ... we're living in la la land. I think that Chazelle's answer is that love and dreams can be achieved by anyone, but it takes an act of courage and even foolishness, and a willingness to fail and change in order to see your dreams come true.

So, "here's to the fools who dream, crazy as they may seem." Maybe I'm one of those fools who is easily romanced by a well done musical, but you'll find me on Sunday February 26th cheering loudly for *La La Land*.

Footnotes

1. [In Defence of La La Land](#). NewStatesman (6 February 2017). ↩