

Call Us By Our Names

These are French movies, after all, so love and death are basically the same thing

📅 June 28, 2021 👤 Michael Giltz

Whether it's first love or last love, passion can seriously mess you up. Summer of 85 shows a 15 year old amidst his overwhelming initial experience with sex and romance and despair. Two Of Us captures older women cautiously edging towards happiness for the first time in their long lives. Since both films are French, you should look elsewhere for a Hallmark happy ending.

Francois Ozon is a fitfully brilliant director, well-suited to the youthful desire on display in Summer Of 85. Unfortunately, he doesn't play fair, burdening the tale with a framing device that ladles melodrama onto the already melodramatic world of teens.

The story is simple enough. Alexis (Felix Lefebvre) is a winsome lad of 15, a little lost but charmingly so and eager for his coming of age, in every sense of the phrase. A minor sailing mishap brings him into the arms of or is it clutches of the "much" older David (Benjamin Voisin), who is all of 18.

David is dark and moody! He drives his motorcycle very fast! Alexis perches on the back of it, freaks out a little and grabs onto David's waist for dear life. He soon realizes this is quite enjoyable. This isn't a film with any time for gay angst.

David's attentions are flattering and overwhelming and you know David will break Alexis's heart if he doesn't break down first. David befriends drunks, picks fights with strangers, dashes off into the night and cruelly picks up a girl in front of Alexis, his way of saying they're over. David never says it's not you, it's me, but he should.

All of this is fine, if familiar. The problem is how Ozon packages the story, which begins at the end. David is dead and Alexis seems to be in lockup, looking like he faces charges of murder one. This being France, the system puts the wheels of justice on hold while the lad writes out a statement on what happened. That statement turns into the movie we're watching. And Alexis's scribbles turn into a novel-length memoir. This being France, such literary efforts are sacred, and you get the sense the judge won't pass a verdict on Alexis's guilt as much as his skills as a writer.

In truth, Alexis didn't kill David, a suggestion that seems absurd almost from the start. After far too long, we discover the crime at hand is an act of grief confused as vandalism. It's unnecessary to weigh down the story with this bait-and-switch.

Just the Two Of Us

In Two Of Us, the elderly act out with all the passion of youth when love is at stake.

Nina (Barbara Sukowa) and Madeleine (Martine Chevallier) are two senior citizens living across the hall from one another. Their worlds are so intertwined that they never close their doors to each other. It might as well be one big apartment. In the first scene, they're preparing for bed but an affectionate glance doesn't lead to demure hand holding. The two women are soon making passionate love.

They've got a retirement villa picked out and Madeleine is ready to go. Nina just needs to sell her apartment so they have the rest of the funds they need. Oh, and Nina needs to tell her son and daughter that their widowed mother has fallen in love with another woman. Not so easy.

This directorial debut by Filippo Meneghetti moves forward simply and inexorably. Nina is too scared to tell her children she's romancing her neighbor when they come over for dinner. Then Nina is too scared to tell Madeleine she didn't come out to her kids.

They reveal the truth, they fight, and before they can resolve anything. Nina has a stroke. The rest of the film centers on Madeleine's increasingly desperate attempts to reach Nina trapped inside that body. She must also justify her needs to children that don't know her, a care giver that's suspicious and a world that can't quite process the desires of a woman of a certain age.

Two Of Us is a more grounded film than Summer of 85. Maybe women in their 60s and 70s can't kid themselves the way a kid might. But even more restraint would be nice. When it allows Nina to sit up straight and stare alertly at everyone around her, we're meant to see the consciousness still alive inside that broken body brought to life. But we don't need the obvious spelled out for us.

As the film stumbles towards an improbable escape from their predicament, we know it's too good to be true. But does the film? Happily, it does and the ending is uncertain, sad and true. As heartbreaking as reality can be, that makes their love all the more moving.

Sukowa and Chevallier infuse each scene with a passionate intensity the two lads can only ape. Felix Lefebvre isn't in their league yet. But he does pull off both the wounded puppy vibe Alexis maintains throughout the romance and the dead-eyed resignation of our hero behind bars.

Plus, Summer Of 85 has one scene of pure joy. Alexis and David are in a discotheque, dancing away to some high energy pop song amidst a crowd of other young, happy people. Out of nowhere, David slaps some headphones and a Walkman onto a startled Alexis and the movie soundtrack flips immediately from that dance number to Rod Stewart rasping his way through "Sailing," an anthemic but quiet song of longing. His confusion turns to bliss.

While the rest of the dancers pogo up and down in a frenzy, Alexis is plunged into a dreamy reverie by the music, swaying and smiling to this startling, gorgeous tune. It's a perfect metaphor for first love, the way you are happily out of touch from everyone around you, wrapped in your own melody while the rest of the world flashes by in a blur you can't bother to notice. They can't hear what you hear, just as they can't see what you see or feel what you feel.

The red herring of Alexis's crime pales next to a flourish like this. David may be trouble from the start but it's no mystery why our hero falls for him. When a lover gives you a moment to treasure forever, you'll forgive him anything.

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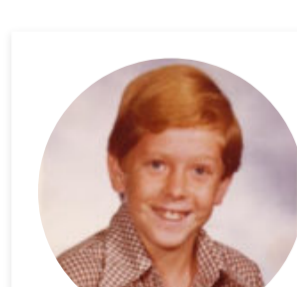
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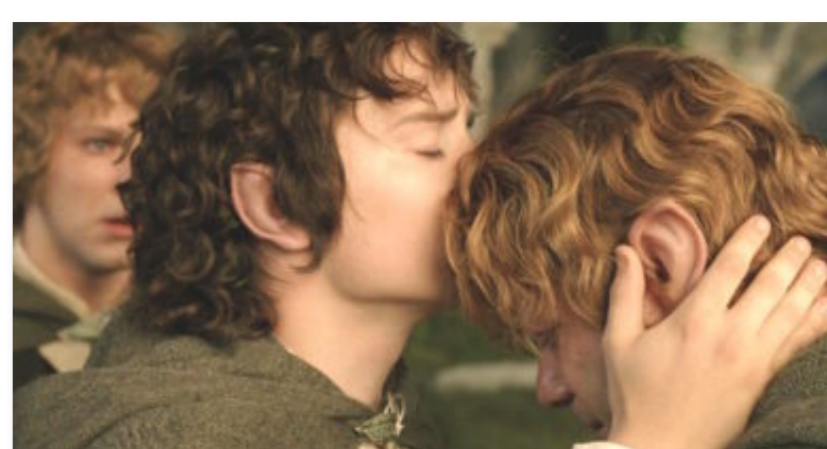
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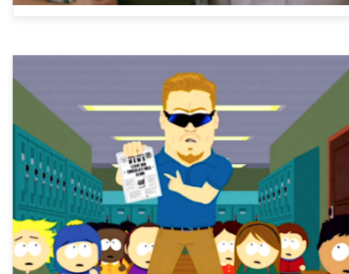
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