

Interview: Director Azazel Jacobs Looks at ‘The Lovers’

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CHICAGO – There is a familiar Stephen Sondheim song called “Send in the Clowns,” which speaks of the absurdity of relationships, and their ups and downs. Writer/director Azazel Jacobs has kind of made a movie version of that song’s meaning, with the trials of a married couple, cheating on each other, in “The Lovers.”

Michael (Tracy Letts) and Mary (Debra Winger) are in a marriage rut that seems impossible to heal. They both have taken lovers, Michael with Lucy (Melora Walters) and Mary with Robert (Aidan Gillen). However, their lovers are getting impatient, each want the other to end the marriage. Michael and Mary make a promise to themselves and their other mates that they will end the charade after their son (Tyler Ross) comes to visit. But strangely, that secret lights a spark between them again. Send in the clowns, don’t bother they’re here.



Debra Winger and Tracy Letts of 'The Lovers,' Directed by Azazel Jacobs

Photo credit: A24

Writer/director Azazel Jacobs has done a remarkable job injecting both the tenderness and absurdity into this unusual story, especially within the entrapments of middle age (Jacobs is a couple decades younger than his main characters). This is his fifth feature film, after receiving acclaim for “Momma’s Man” (2008) and “Terri” (2011). He also wrote and directed the two seasons of the HBO series, “Doll & Em.”

HollywoodChicago.com: I found it substantial that you were able to understand the circumstances of the point in life that Tracy and Debra’s characters were in. What was the key to projecting yourself into their lives, in writing this story?

Azazel Jacobs: That’s really great to hear. I have to say, as someone who still dresses as if he were 15 years old, that these realities don’t change for me, I just keep listening. This is still where I’m finding life. I don’t see that much change in how I’m approaching things, for better or for worse.

HollywoodChicago.com: So what did you observe in couples that inspired you to write the story. Was it something general or specific? What was the origin of this inspiration?

Jacobs: Personally, I've been in love twice in my life. I was in a relationship from age 20 to 26, and I've been with my wife now for 16 years. Those were very different types of love, but they've been equally essential and important. I've been different people with them, and I've learned different things from them. And in some ways, those relationships continue, whether you're with that person or not. I felt like this story was a way to be at peace with these simultaneous relationships that are going on within me.

I think of this film not as judging liars and cheaters, but looking at those conflicting feelings we all have. I'm attracted to different things, that's why there are so many tones in this film. I'm interested in a broad range. I want to figure out how to touch all things within that spectrum. For instance, when I see a 19 year-old couple holding hands, I remember that feeling, I'm still that person who felt that feeling. I wonder if someone who is 80 years old can remember that same feeling?

HollywoodChicago.com: You had a contrast between the young love relationship that the couple's son was experiencing and his parent's difficulties. What were you saying about how things change for couples who are together for awhile, as opposed to the young love – that bright light as opposed to the dimming of the older couple?

Jacobs: My parents have been together for over 50 years, and are still very much in love, so my example of what their love is conflicts with most of the rest of the world, and I've never been with anybody who had a similar situation. Never. But also, my parents had to work to raise me and my sister normally, which was opposite to how they were raised.

I see a lot of hope for [younger couple] Joel and Erin, because in a strange way Joel was given the gift of seeing what to push against in relationships. I'm fascinated with that learning curve, I want to push against this movie when I make my next movie. I want to propel myself in a different direction. My wife and my crew encourage me to do that push back.



On Set: Azazel Jacobs Directs a Scene in 'The Lovers'

Photo credit: A24

HollywoodChicago.com: Relationships like Michael and Mary – and divorce – are more the norm in the last couple generations than previously in society. How do you think, in your observation, these generations handle that through their relationships?

Jacobs: I think primarily it makes their desperation for something truthful that much greater, they are more attuned to what is bullshit and what isn't. Some people would look at the character of Joel and think he is over the top... I think it's a proper reaction to the world that he is currently in. I miss having that passion and fight. I still wish I could scream 'this is bullshit, and f**k you and your rules and the stupid world' – those things that Joel was feeling. But we learn to accept things, resign ourselves to them, so we can function.

But I think Joel has the most promising future of all the characters at the end. I think his girlfriend Erin is sticking around to see what he is made of, and what will become of him. That curiosity is what Michael and Mary had let go of a long time ago.

HollywoodChicago.com: Let's talk about Debra Winger, in her first lead role in a film for awhile. What was the origin of her involvement, and what impressed you the most in her interpretation of Mary?

Jacobs: Debra saw a previous film of mine, 'Terri' [2011], and stopped me after I did a Q&A. She told me she really cared about the film, and

I was honored and flattered, because it was Debra Winger! [laughs] But there was something else, and I said it to a friend who was with me at the time. It was the way she looked at me, her focus and her eyes. Of course it's Debra Winger, and I'm going to be extra observant, but that is what planted the seed. I wanted to figure out how to use those eyes in a film.

When I was writing ‘The Lovers,’ I had her in mind. I was focusing on how people look at each other, and Debra is a seeker as well, she is curious. It's a trick to find performers who have proven themselves, but are still hungry. Rather than jumping onto someone who is hot right now, there are also all these actors out there that have done it at that high level, plus they are still hungry for more.

HollywoodChicago.com: Michael and Mary live in a faceless town and have faceless jobs. Beyond making a living, what do you think of 21st Century life, that you communicated through the lives of Michael and Mary?

Jacobs: That they are lucky, lucky to live in the right now. They have a home, they have jobs that they can be late for, but still those jobs will be there for them tomorrow. I'm not looking down on that, I'm not saying I wish they would have stayed artists – Michael was in a cover band, not the highest end of music. I see them in this lucky situation, and these life problems still happen to them. It still happens to all of us.

HollywoodChicago.com: Any other 21st Century artifice that you had to understand to make the movie?



Azazel Jacobs, Writer/Director of ‘The Lovers’
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Jacobs: Mobile phones. In many ways, this is the worst thing to happen to movie storytelling, so many directors have trouble adding them into the mix. There is so much voided in drama when one character can simply call another, there is nothing dynamic in that familiarity. Even I tried to find ways to avoid in my previous works. But in this film, texting harks back to silent movies... it's almost like telepathy, we're almost there. [laughs] We can use a heart, a rose and a fist, and that says ‘I love you very much.’

HollywoodChicago.com: Your first film, ‘Nobody Needs to Know,’ had a very similar story about the awkwardness of fame that the series ‘Doll & Em’ explored later. What interests you about that particular fame topic?

Jacobs: ‘Nobody Needs to Know’ was about an actress who decides to stop acting, and people want her because of that, and she becomes a star. I am somebody who is fascinated with the theatrics of life, and how to represent those theatrics in a movie. For me, it's an honest way to express the fabrication that is in creating a film, the line that is drawn.

When I first learned that you can take one shot you made on Thursday, and sync it up with another shot made on Tuesday, in that way the lie [the separate shots] creates a truth. The actors in the scene can be not even in the same room, talking to something else, and then I put those shots together and we can feel the truth of the moment being depicted. That kind of bizarre situation has been reconciled within me – I'm trying to come to peace with ‘yes, this has been created, but hopefully there is a greater truth in the finished result.’

HollywoodChicago.com: You've done virtually every kind of production work on films – cinematographer, producer, editor, even actor – how has doing all that made you a better director?

Jacobs: I've done all those other jobs really badly. [laughs] That is the truth. It's made me a better director because I feel like directing is the only thing I can really do.

“The Lovers” opened in Chicago, and has been released nationwide. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Tracy Letts, Debra Winger, Tyler Ross, Melora Walters and Aidan Gillen. Written and directed by Azazel Jacobs. Rated “R”

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