

Rachel McAdams, Channing Tatum Don't Stick to 'The Vow'

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – “The Vow” was “inspired by true events.” The end credits even showed the real couple of those events. Given the actual film, it’s likely that inspiration came in the form of “making stuff up,” as Rachel McAdams and Channing Tatum were opposite to any reality in this illogical, strangely cold romance.

Set in a Chicago that only an outsider can understand, “The Vow” uses a plot device – random, selective amnesia – that today is only used in a soap opera. No matter how this condition is presented, it is almost impossible to rationally believe it, because everything that’s forgotten is conveniently tied to a recent marriage of a lovey-dovey couple. Suddenly the whole audience become brain surgeons, making the diagnosis that suspending disbelief is impossible.

The film begins with the intoned narration of Leo (Channing Tatum), describing the precious story of his true love Paige (Rachel McAdams). After meeting in a parking lot, they have a montage of courtship, which ends up in marriage at Chicago’s Art Institute. All is perfect, which always forebodes an ill wind. While Leo and Paige are making out in a parked car on a snowy street in the winter, a city truck plows into them, crashing Paige through the windshield and into the emergency room.



Leo is fine, but Paige is languishing in intensive care. She is put into an induced coma to relieve brain trauma, and when she awakens doesn't recognize her own husband. She has severe memory loss, so severe that she doesn't know she's a trained sculptor, doesn't remember

where she lives and can't remember any of the life with her husband. The last memory she has is of life with her parents (Sam Neill and Jessica Lange) in a wealthy suburb, going to law school and being engaged to someone else (Scott Speedman). It is now up to Leo to win her back again.

This would have worked better as a fantasy, like maybe an ancient island curse or a flaming skull that strips all of the marriage memory. Putting the situation in the context of a car accident – inspired by true events or not – cheapens the real issue of brain trauma, and allows it to be a backdrop for a queasy romantic situation rather than life or death. That notion becomes more annoying as the scenario plays out, for Paige also retreats to her parent's wealthy existence, and becomes – as Leo puts it – a sorority girl. It's hard to believe that losing memory also means losing personality or character, but this film wants to steer this unlikely situation as a means to generate a love story. That makes any attempt at endearment as chilly as a Chicago winter.

Speaking of Chicago, the city of big shoulders, it is again used as a prop in this film rather than a character. The story might as well have been set in Omaha, given how the Windy City fared as the story location (turns out a major portion was done in Toronto). It is annoying for natives to see only certain parts of town shown over and over, while references to specific areas are blithely tossed about without any regard for reality. The "corner of Diversey," mentioned in the film, refers to a Chicago avenue with hundreds of corners, that extends from the lake to the western suburbs. At least such references will add some laughs for the Chicago crowd.

Channing Tatum and Rachel McAdams are victims of the material, because both are charming and competent in other movies, but here are forced to wrestle like cage matchers against the absurd plot. Tatum in particular gets shafted, he seems confused by his character. Is he an anti-establishment rocker or \$1000 suit model? The film wants him to be both. McAdams has a great look on film, probably one of the best on-screen smiles of the current actress crop, but is lost as someone who has had "brain trauma" (as she keeps saying). She is scared of her old life because she can't remember it, but also goes on a "date" with her hunky husband, and takes a underwear-clad swim in Lake Michigan. Actions like that have no honesty in context.



Channing Tatum and Rachel McAdams Put the Pieces Together in 'The Vow'
Photo credit: Kerry Hayes for Screen Gems

These type of formulaic films, marketed toward a Valentine's Day holiday, lack warmth because they lack the element of honesty and reality. Studios think that pairing a hunk and a hottie is enough, that audiences will swoon over them and not even consider the story. This mistake is always indicated in the box office numbers past the opening weekend, because after the date crowd hustles to see Channing and Rachel, would they recommend this film past the initial rush? Unlikely.

Love stories are hard, because there is no universality to them. It seems like every coupling in history has their own fingerprint in the way they came together. The fingerprint of "The Vow" is difficult to distinguish, the unique lines and ridges are all blurred.

"The Vow" opens everywhere on February 10th. Featuring Rachel McAdams, Channing Tatum, Jessica Lange, Sam Neill, Scott Speedman and Wendy Crewson. Screenplay by Jason Katims, Abby Kohn, Marc Silverstein and Michael Sucsy. Directed by Michael Sucsy. Rated "PG-13"



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