

## ‘A Late Quartet’ is Passionate Symphony of the Human Condition

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on November 3, 2012 - 8:51pm

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Those who know the language of music at its highest levels seemingly know the secret of the world. But as “A Late Quartet” demonstrates, they also possess the same human foibles as the rest of us. Philip Seymour Hoffman, Catherine Keener and Christopher Walken portray maestros at an emotional crossroads.

The film is magnificently passionate, with a literal script that debates the finer points of a successfully routine ritual, long relationships and the decision to face the end of a career. It focuses on four people who are intertwined by a business relationship – that of a high level symphony string quartet – but hiding the emotional context of that interaction, leading to inappropriate expressions of their truth once it all comes to the surface. The acting is superb, especially the old lion in winter Christopher Walken, gratefully pulling away from his stereotypical persona and delivering a nuanced and subtle performance.

The film opens with the quartet taking the stage. There is a hesitation between them that indicates some unspoken conflict. It then divulges the story of the four – the lead violinist Daniel (Mark Ivanir), second violin Robert (Philip Seymour Hoffman), viola player Juliette (Catherine Keener) and celloist Peter (Christopher Walken). It is revealed that they are one of the world’s finest quartets, that Robert and Juliette are married and that Peter is about to announce that after 25 years that he may be retiring from the group.



The Foursome: Daniel (Mark Ivanir), Robert (Philip Seymour Hoffman), Peter (Christopher Walken) and Juliette (Catherine Keener) in ‘A Late Quartet’

*Photo credit: RKO Pictures*

Peter's announcement opens up years of repressed opinions, especially from Robert. These rocky pronouncements begin to have an effect on the dynamic of the quartet, which also begins to involve Alexandra (Imogen Poots), the daughter of Robert and Juliette. Every member of the long-time symphony companions are about to go through their greatest career and emotional challenges, as long simmering consequences are about to boil over.

In many ways, this film has more "action" than an action movie. Once the announcement is made from Peter, everything about the buttoned down string quartet becomes undone. This reflects toward infidelity, illness, wrong-way relationships and back stabbing intrigue – several times the usual happenstance of an average Bruce Willis movie. Just because the action is of the heart and inner expression doesn't mean it doesn't qualify as action. Most adults would relate to this movie much more than a fantasy shoot-em-up as well, as simmering emotions seem to be a relatable byproduct of the maturing process.

The whole cast give wonderful performances, and have strong but realistic reactions to their worlds falling apart. Christopher Walken is a standout, it has been awhile since he's flexed the differing feelings that were asked of him in the Peter character, and he delivers vulnerability, triumph and a musician's stately manner within the persona. Philip Seymour Hoffman becomes an open wound as Robert, who expresses some deeply buried pain that manifests itself in a destructive mode. Catherine Keener steps up to the challenge of being the quartet's earth mother, a background role that becomes more unappreciated as the events unfold.

The less familiar members of the cast shine as well. The British actress Imogen Poots – whose name sounds like a Mary Poppins character – gives the right amount of young adult angst to Alexandra, a combination of sexiness and naivete. Her actions are a sense of transition, between the perky music student to the higher adult sphere. The most unknown of the actors in the quartet, Mark Ivanir, spars sincerely with his more well known colleagues and develops his perfectionist character with ice-in-his-veins ease. This makes the breakdown of his controlled world all the more poignant.



Alexandra (Imogen Poots) Performs in 'A Late Quartet'  
Photo credit: RKO Pictures

One of the smaller elements of the film, but just as important, is a documentary that was made about the quartet, and is shown throughout the film, highlighted at various times. The attention to detail, showing the fictional musicians in archival footage and photographs, was flawless. This film-within-the-film becomes important and its details generates a vital contribution to the overall narrative. It is that careful craftsmanship of director Yaron Ziberman, along with a powerful and literal script (co-written with Seth Grossman) that liberates the story from the preconceived starchiness of a musician's world.

Going back to the unique language of the high level symphony musician, it perpetuates itself over and over in "A Late Quartet," that rarified air of truth in sonic life. The composer is Beethoven, but the interpretive result that flows through the quartet is the unique energy of talent, passion and emotion that both enriches the music and separates them.

*"A Late Quartet" had a limited release, including Chicago, on November 2nd. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Philip Seymour Hoffman, Christopher Walken, Catherine Keener, Mark Ivanir, Wallace Shawn and Imogen Poots,. Written by Seth Grossman and Yaron Ziberman. Directed by Yaron Ziberman. Rated "R"*



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