

Michael Cera, Gaby Hoffmann Anchor ‘Crystal Fairy’

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – It’s a sad day in modern American distribution when a film as highly praised and perversely intriguing as Sebastián Silva’s “Magic Magic” fails to acquire a theatrical release. The very notion of a Sundance darling co-lensed by Christopher Doyle getting unceremoniously dumped on DVD is too maddening to contemplate. At a time when Disney labels a formulaic misfire like “The Lone Ranger” as a “risk,” it’s depressing to see a company like Sony Pictures follow suit.

Anyone who’s seen Silva’s 2009 masterpiece, “The Maid,” is well aware that the director operates far outside the cozy constraints of genre, allowing his narratives to evolve as organically and unpredictably as his character do. What starts out as an unsettling dark comedy may end up as an endearingly bittersweet drama or vice versa. Without taking gambles on films that challenge the most obvious of expectations, Hollywood risks boring its audience into oblivion. Take this season’s handful of big-budget, low-risk flops as evidence of this principle.

Apart from its disastrous stabs at popcorn blockbusters, 2013 will also be remembered as the year Michael Cera proved without a shadow of a doubt that he has a range extending far beyond the deadpan utterances of sweet George Michael Bluth. He illustrated this not only on the fourth season of “Arrested Development” and in his uncharacteristically profane cameo in “This Is the End”—both deemed considerable hits—but on his YouTube channel JASH in shorts such as “Failure,” “Gregory Go Boom” and his own directorial debut, “Brazzaville Teen-Ager.” In each case, Cera has explored sides to his screen persona that many viewers had doubted ever existed. He’s still a neurotic tangle of nerve endings in most cases, but the innocence and charm that marked his earlier work has been replaced with vain self-absorption, nihilistic rage and nearly pathological angst. Instead of allowing his talent to be crushed by Hollywood’s soulless assembly line (a la Johnny Depp), Cera has wisely taken the road less traveled, committing himself entirely to the work of artists he respects. That’s why he spent three months living at Silva’s home to learn Spanish for “Magic Magic,” in which he reportedly plays the biggest creep of his career. In light of Cera’s earlier successes this year, Sony should be feeling foolish for not giving Silva’s film a fair shot with moviegoers.



Michael Cera and Gaby Hoffmann star in Sebastián Silva's *Crystal Fairy*.

Photo credit: Sofía Subercaseaux/Sundance Selects

Sadly, Cera fans eager to see the actor's audacious work on the big screen will have to settle for “Crystal Fairy,” the improvisational road trip comedy Silva shot in 12 days while waiting for production on “Magic Magic” to commence. It's a modestly entertaining trifle that truly feels cobbled together in one's spare time, lacking the rich characterizations and vibrantly textured wit that made Silva's previous work so memorable. Though it snagged a directing prize for Silva at Sundance, it appears to be the minor work of his two collaborations with Cera, and has received considerably less enthusiastic buzz. Perhaps Sundance Selects picked it up for distribution in part because a comedy starring Michael Cera sounded a lot more marketable than a psychological thriller starring Michael Cera. In any case, despite its alleged genre of choice, “Crystal Fairy” barely elicits a single laugh, while instead generating a great deal of squirm-inducing unease. Based on an actual story from Silva's life, the film stars Cera as Jamie, an American tourist so self-involved that he won't let anything—not even a naked woman—disrupt his unwavering obsession with the San Pedro cactus. With the help of his three Chilean buddies (played with interchangeable blandness by Silva's brothers), Jamie embarks on a desperate quest for the hallucinogen, intending to experience its high-flying pleasures, even though he (and the film itself) appears drug-addled from the get-go. An early sequence where Jamie studies his own twirling fecal matter deftly sets the tone for all the unabashed bizarreness that follows.

Though Cera's work here is superb, the film's real salvation materializes in the form of Gaby Hoffmann as Crystal Fairy, the eccentric and frequently unclothed quasi-hippie who accompanies Jamie on his adventure. For the film's first two-thirds, Silva appears to be constructing his own variation on “Planes, Trains and Automobiles,” with the uptight Jamie fretting over Crystal's loud and singularly weird lifestyle. She's a misfit in the most classic sense, yet she hardly seems aware of that fact, taking every opportunity to share with strangers her supposedly enlightened philosophies on life. She's kooky for sure, but undeserving of Jamie's mean-spirited vitriol. Like Steve Martin in “Planes,” Jamie ultimately must learn the value of compassion, particularly when faced with Crystal's painful revelation about her past, which holds a key to much of her confounding behavior. Though this twist feels imposed on the material, Hoffmann single-handedly lends it credibility with her shattering performance. In a way, both Silva/Cera films are cautionary tales about the importance of keeping one's true identity out of the closet. Whereas Cera's repressed homosexuality fuels the malice in “Magic,” Hoffmann's professed secret provides “Crystal” with a genuine sense of cleansing catharsis in its final act.



Juan Andrés Silva, José Miguel Silva and Michael Cera star in Sebastián Silva's Crystal Fairy.
Photo credit: Sofía Subercaseaux/Sundance Selects

Though its overarching structure is more or less familiar, the execution is jarringly unpredictable in ways both exciting and frustrating. The picture frequently lurches between moments of visceral intensity, such as the Jamie's disturbing initial reaction to the San Pedro, and forced whimsy. There are even a few scenes in which Silva appears to be experimenting with horror movie tropes, as if doing practice rounds on "Magic Magic," epitomized by the inexplicable flash frame containing the demonic face of Pazuzu from "The Exorcist." Just thought I'd confirm that in case anyone thought they hallucinated it. I'll be the first person to admit that "Crystal Fairy" doesn't quite work, though that won't stop me from recommending it not only on the basis of its two lead performances but on the no-holds-barred conviction of its director. Even at his sloppiest, Silva has a rare knack for keeping audiences fully invested, if only on the promise that what they'll see will be unlike anything they've experienced. Considering the dismal state of this summer movie season, Silva's promise couldn't be better timed.

'Crystal Fairy' stars Michael Cera, Gaby Hoffmann, Juan Andrés Silva, José Miguel Silva and Agustín Silva. It was written and directed by Sebastián Silva. It opens Friday, July 19th at the Music Box Theatre. It is not rated.



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