

Passion of Young French Love Fuels ‘My Golden Days’

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Feel like a French film? Well, “My Golden Days” is just the ticket. Full of existential romance, too many cigarettes, casual carnality and pathological regret, the story should come with its own beret and baguette. Rich in detail, and awash in fine European actors, the movie is a perfect anecdote for “American Exceptionalism.”

It also speaks to the trigger of memory. When youth is a faraway concept, what trips the lever of remembering? In this case, it is the post 9/11 world. The main character, a French academic diplomat, travels freely as he has throughout his entire life, until his well-worn passport activates the “watch list.” This in turn sparks his backward contemplation, and the motivations that made him. I love stuff like this...if you are of age or close to the teenagers characters entering adulthood, the ache of their young love might be too familiar for comfort. If you’re more of a geezer – like I am – it will conjure memories of the foolishness and compassion of that time of life. In either case, “My Golden Days” carves an emotional path through the maze of being.

Paul (Mathieu Amalric) is a French academic consultant, and world traveler. He is coming “home” after a diplomatic mission, when his passport is tagged on the “watch list.” He is interrogated in the stark room by a mysterious enforcer, and the memory of giving up his passport as a 19 year-old student – so a Russian man of similar age could defect – surfaces through the questioning. The twin Paul is dead, but the real Paul is caught in a web of remembrance surrounding the interrogation.



Esther (Lou Roy-Lecollinet) and Paul (Quentin Dolmaire) Share Pillow Talk in “My Golden Days”

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

Young Paul (Quentin Dolmaire) was a restless spirit as a 20 year old man in the late 1980s, having grown up in a dysfunctional household – his mentally ill mother had committed suicide – with his brother Ivan (Raphael Cohen) and sister Delphine (Lily Taleb). When he meets the “love of his life,” Esther (Lou Roy-Lecollinet), he begins two years of triumph, sorrow and young passion – a time that old Paul would rather not relive.

This is about the one that got away, the one great love affair that was doomed through timing from the start. Chemistry comes into play, Esther is one of the most desired women during that time in their small French city, and she knows it. But once she fixes her voodoo upon Paul, all is lost for the both of them. Whether you’ve had a relationship like this or not, co-writer/director Arnaud Desplechin (“A Christmas Tale”) tackles it head on. There is a refreshing honesty about the potholes and obsessions regarding this affair, and it plays out to an appropriately unorthodox conclusion.

The actors portraying the younger teen/young adults of the late 1980s are richly free and French, branded within their symbolic witnessing (on TV) of the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The understanding of their emotions within their characters made the energy work, and the director (no doubt) was available to guide actor Quentin Dolmaire through the “Paul” of his own soul. The film is very personal, and luxuriates in that intimacy and vulnerability.

They all sleep with each other, which agains feels European and French, but the twist is that they tell one another when do so, no matter who is paired with whom. Paul and Esther have a long-distance relationship for most of the story, and it destroys them by degrees. It may be that they lash out this frustration through the mechanics of sex, but each indiscretion also chips away at the foundation of their love. From a distance of audience voyeurism, the honesty may be stimulating, but in actual practice the damage is all too apparent.



Old Paul (Mathieu Amalric) Contemplates Life in “My Golden Days”

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

The ending was uncomfortable and surprising, as it ends in the present day. I felt a bit taken aback by the series of reactions that Paul has in regard to the end of the story’s memory, but this was the decision of the storyteller. One hint not to take it at face value – it is fiction, after all – is that director Desplechin gazes at each memory through the “iris shot” (think that “hole effect” in the screen within a silent movie). Paul is looking back through a lens of his own making – it could be a true perspective or it could be a gauzy overly romantic view of nostalgic yesterdays. Either way, he’s tortured by it all.

There is nothing more intense that the hormones of youthful rutting combined with discovered perceptions of romantic love. It gets mixed up so many times, and causes so many mistakes in coupling, and causes such drama! You say you want an evolution, well you know, try coming to terms with something you once had no control over, filtered through the mists of a long time gone.

“My Golden Days” has a limited release nationwide, including Chicago. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Mathieu Amalric, Quentin Dolmaire, Lou Roy-Lecollinet and Lily Taleb. Written by Arnaud Desplechin and Julie Peyr. Directed by Arnaud Desplechin. Rated “R”



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