

Strange Story of 'Disobedience' is Constant Distraction

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on May 9, 2018 - 10:22am

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The director Sebastián Lelio is no stranger to oddball human stories. His 2017 film, “A Fantastic Woman” – the Oscar winner for Best Foreign Language Film – was a one-of-a-kind but amazingly poignant story of identity. His latest, “Disobedience,” mines the same human territory with lesser results.

The film is based on a novel by Naomi Alderman, and this is another film in the latest trend to infiltrate the world of Orthodox Jews (like the recent “Menashe” and upcoming “To Dust”). The two Rachels – Weisz and McAdams – portray lovers brought together again through the circumstance of the death of a Orthodox rabbi... who happens to be the father of Weisz’s character. The return of that character to her roots upsets the delicate balance of the closed society. The key and centerpiece lesbian relationship is entirely distracting to the larger themes of the story, not helped by the two familiar performers playing out the affair. There also is a familiar conclusion in the story as well, which also doesn’t serve the slow pacing of the film by director Lelio. It was a perfect example of how to make a pretty wild story less wild.

Rav Krushka (Anton Lesser) drops dead in the middle of a Orthodox Jewish service in London. This shakes the small community, including his right hand man Dovid Kuperman (Alessandro Nivola, unrecognizable) and his wife Esti (Rachel McAdams). Somehow, Krushka’s prodigal daughter Ronit (Rachel Weisz) makes it back for Shiva, much to the surprise of the whole gathering.



The Two Rachels – McAdams and Weisz – are Lovers in 'Disobedience'

Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

It becomes clear that Esti and Ronit had more of a friendship than is first thought, and the sexual tension between them is soon being manifested in the usual dark corners. Meanwhile Dovid is being touted as the new rabbi for his community, and cannot abide the non-patriarchal interruptions of Ronit. The relationship between the two women starts to achieve an intensity, which means decisions will have to be made.

I will say this now (and I understand that in the age of the Internet that actresses have to be cautious), I am a bit tired of movies with sex where everyone keeps their clothes on. McAdams was more willing than Weisz, but her nudity was always framed as a sense of vulnerability, and when the big moment came between the two Rachels it seemed as chaste as heavy petting. I'm not talking about that as a hetero white male, but as someone who gets easily distracted by elements that take me out of the story.

Director Lelio's "A Fantastic Woman" was much more forceful and direct, precisely because he guided the story in that direction. "Disobedience" is much more mellow, with the women knowing their status in the realm of the Orthodox Jewish community. The men, however, acted more castrated than insistent in their power, and in that sense that is exactly what Ronit's appearance was designed to do... but the clash needed a little more electricity.



Dovid (Alessandro Nivola) Confronts Ronit in 'Disobedience'

Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

The performances were good, Rachel Weisz is an acting treasure. Rachel McAdams was forced into a will-she-won't-see conundrum – always difficult for an actor – but she does have some pretty good scenes, and wasn't afraid of the aforementioned vulnerability of her character's tortured soul. Alessandro Nivola was behind a huge beard (symbolic?) as the religious representation, and he asserts himself best in the early scenes, when his conflicted emotions emerge when Ronit comes to town.

The world of extreme religiosity is always fascinating, and the title is basically the story, because humans tend to "disobey" when dealing with their own inner energies, especially when they clash so radically with the religion often dealt to them as children. Can you tell I'm a recovering Catholic? Is that worse than a white male? I'll let my inner shame discuss.

"Disobedience" opened in Chicago on May 4th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Rachel Weisz, Rachel McAdams, Alessandro Nivola, Nicholas Woodeson, Anton Lesser. Screenplay adapted by Rob Greenberg and Rebecca Lenkiewicz. Directed by Rob Greenberg. Rated "R"



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