

Colin Firth Plays a Wistful Game of Solitaire in 'A Single Man'

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – There is a certain madness in the shock of grieving over a loved one who has passed that manifests itself in particular ways. Colin Firth interprets those emotions intuitively in the captivating "A Single Man."

Firth portrays George, a tenured literature professor at a mid-level California university in 1962. As an expatriate from Britain, he has barely adapted to the different ways of his new homeland. As the film opens, he is shown in a strange situation where he is approaching an automobile that has skidded in snowstorm. A man has been thrown from the vehicle. George kisses him.

It is learned later that Jim (Matthew Goode), his lover of 16 years, had been killed in an automobile accident. Given that gay men were mostly closeted in this era, George is not welcome at the funeral. Cut off and stranded in a life without his partner, George must wake up to face the day and make some decisions of his own.



Life Without Him: Colin Firth as George in 'A Single Man'
Photo credit: Copyright © The Weinstein Company

What follows is a twisted, almost surreal sadness of a day, as George meanders through and contemplates the life that is facing him. His only solace is his best friend, Charley (Julianne Moore), and perhaps the connection to a number of people and memories that evoke Jim. In his open wound state, George does have a vulnerability and spirit that makes him free, and in that freedom perhaps a path to redemption.

Colin Firth has a presence of ownership in this film, which is necessary for it to work. He goes through the sea change of emotions within the 24 hour period depicted and captures all of them without seeming maudlin. His costuming and bearing helps to create the character, with his horn rim 1960s professor glasses giving him a Clark Kent air, and startlingly he looks much like George Reeves, the actor who played Superman in the late 1950s.

Firth's character is constantly reminding us of the challenges facing gay men in the early 1960s. He refers to himself and Jim as "invisible" men, and throughout his day of mourning seeks to prove that invisibility. This is actually in contrast to Jim, who in flashbacks is depicted as a rare "out and proud" gay man in spite of the era.



The Party's Over: Julianne Moore as Charley in 'A Single Man'
Photo credit: Copyright © The Weinstein Company

The emphasis on a gay man's plight is perfectly illustrated in the sequence with Julianne Moore's character Charley. They are old friends, and Charley is seeking to console him. But through that consoling is the frustration that Charley expresses regarding her bad luck with men. If only they could be like her friend George, and if only George would partake of her pleasure, then everything would be all right. The talented Moore again reaches down into nuances that demonstrates the character's blindness to her friend's sorrow and disappointment that it isn't about her.

Writer/director Tom Ford, a notable fashion designer, makes a stunning debut as a film artist. His canvas is George's despair, in which he paints a series of thought processes from the grieving man's point of view.

There are memories, dreams and meditations that illustrate the melancholy of loss, richly broadening the empathy for George's 24 hour journey and his life as a gay man in 1962. It seems as much a personal project as professional, and succeeds in both arenas because of Ford's unique imprint.

We will face our remaining days much like a ledger sheet, with profits and losses checked off as each fiscal year is applied. And perhaps down that path there will be so sudden a loss that any recovery from it will be based on how much courage we have left to recover.

The character of George in A Single Man exposes the human element in reacting to both that profit and loss, through the veil of a society that doesn't want to acknowledge that privilege. We are all George, we are all invisible persons.

"A Single Man" has a limited release on December 25th. Check local listings. Featuring Colin Firth, Julianne Moore, Matthew Goode, Nicholas Hoult and written/directed by Tom Ford. Rated "R"



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