

Movie Review: 'Romance & Cigarettes'

by David_Elliott

Part of the fun of "Romance & Cigarettes" - and only the right mood will let you inhale this one - is the thought of John Turturro grinning, lighting up, puffing his film through the air.

ROMANCE & CIGARETTES' - Kate Winslet really lights up for an inflamed moment in John Turturro's sorta musical comedy 'Romance & Cigarettes.' CNS Photo courtesy of Boroturro. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) One of our finest actors, Turturro has shown filming talents before. He wrote and directed "Mac" (1992), a strong working-class family story. Wildly versatile as an actor, Turturro as moviemaker fondles his roots with generous pleasure.

James Gandolfini stars as Nick Murder, who, despite the name, is not a hood but a New York bridge worker. Of course, Gandolfini hauls some heft of menace from "The Sopranos," and when his angry wife, Kitty (Susan Sarandon), tears into him, she can easily match Edie Falco as Tony Soprano's Carmela.

Kitty firehoses Nick ("I hate you with all the hate you can hate with!") for being a "whoremaster" fixated on a lurid British tart. That would be Kate Winslet as Tula, a redhead with mouth to match. If you try to recall dear Rose from "Titanic," forget it.

But probably Turturro didn't, because he put Winslet into a remarkable scene, singing underwater (to a Connie Francis tune) as her lush hair streams around her. It could be a weirdly funny, lyrical postscript to "Titanic," and it matters because, like all the people, Tula opens up through song.

Sometimes they really sing, often they lip-sync and sway to proven masters like Elvis, James Brown, Bruce Springsteen, Tom Jones (his "Delilah" gets the best dance number moving). The film jigs along somewhere between a musical and karaoke, often at the exact midpoint of charm.

Of course, everyone talks (even Tula) like New Yorkers who enjoy profaning New Jersey. Turturro, born in Brooklyn, has the patter down pat. He does not star, but has family members in the film and suffuses it emotionally, his heart obviously having DJ'd the musical selections.

All about the ruin and rehab of Nick and Kitty, "Romance & Cigarettes" can nag your patience. Not with its smartly done, funny crassness about sex but some soft, day-dreaming sloppiness. On a trim budget, Turturro roped in a bunch of gifted pals and people he wanted to work with, gave them street presence and let music enhance Tom Stern's strongly shot urban spaces.

Any director who can get Gandolfini to endure middle-aged circumcision, who has lovely Winslet profaning profusely, who lets Steve Buscemi snark a quip about Randolph Scott, who makes Christopher Walken strut like Elvis while confiding "Some people fear the Lord, I fear women" - well, such a director can also pull off a Bach organ scene in salute to "La Dolce Vita."

Using his soul of asphalt and mush, Turturro made this show his way, a blithe take on his New York. Call it "New York: The Smoochical."

A Boroturro release. Director, writer: John Turturro. Cast: James Gandolfini, Kate Winslet, Susan Sarandon, Steve Buscemi, Christopher Walken, Aida Turturro, Mandy Moore, Bobby Cannavale. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

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