

Movie Review: Luminescent performances light up rich 'Two Lovers'

by *Creators Syn. Movie Reviewers*

"Two Lovers" is too good to be true.

In a cinematic season when studios dump their leftovers from the year before, a salient picture like this one shows up with rich characters, a heartfelt story and fine performances from a trio of 30-something actors.

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Joaquin Phoenix plays Leonard, a damaged man living with his parents in the deeply rooted Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn. He toils in the family dry cleaning business, a law school dropout healing from a suicidal breakdown.

This home with old-country parents, portrayed by the divine Isabella Rossellini and the Israeli actor Moni Moshonov, is a respite of calm. As parents do, they want what's best for him, and that means meeting Sandra (impressive Vinessa Shaw), a nice Jewish girl and the daughter of a businessman buying their store. Leonard likes her, sharing his passion for photography, and they form a gentle, romantic relationship.

Then, tall, willowy blond Michelle moves into the building (tall, willowy blond Gwyneth Paltrow). Michelle's being put up by the married Manhattan lawyer (Elias Koteas, perfect in his arrogant way) with whom she's having an affair.

Phoenix's excitement with this shiksa from heaven, who appears so suddenly in his life and is willing to share deep, personal feelings, is palpable. He's seduced by this once-in-a-lifetime adventure. Cutesy cell phone calls and voyeuristic shenanigans from their across-the-way apartment windows are natural and touching.

"You're like a brother to me," she says to him. "I can talk to you as a friend."

Invited to meet Michelle and her lover for dinner in Manhattan, Leonard dresses up and takes the subway, getting to the restaurant early.

He downs a Brandy Alexander through a straw because that's what she drinks. The scene is delicious, chocolate-rich.

There's also a beautifully shot vignette when Leonard accompanies Michelle and her girlfriends to a hot Manhattan club. There, he shows off his dancing skills. Director James Gray catches the steam of the venue, the quivering bodies and the action.

Paltrow, the "Shakespeare in Love" Oscar winner who returns as Pepper Potts, super-secretary to Robert Downey Jr.'s Tony Stark, in next year's "Iron Man 2," is a talent too often taken for granted. She shouldn't be. In "Two Lovers," Paltrow shows off a radiant depth of character.

At one point, visiting Leonard's home, it's as if she entered a foreign country. "What are those things?" she points at a cabinet. Explains Leonard, "Those are dreidels."

Gray, a native New Yorker who guided Phoenix in "The Yards" and "We Own the Night," captures the neighborhood environment he knows well ("Little Odessa," his first film, was set in Brighton Beach).

"Two Lovers" isn't autobiographical like the "Brighton Beach Memoirs" of Neil Simon, which centered on a teenager's hormonal cravings. But it does re-create an old-fashioned household reminiscent of a grandparents' where seltzer is the drink of choice and the aromas of chicken soup are in the air.

And it tests this dilemma: What if someone loves you and you love someone else? Gray handles that exquisitely.

Phoenix, whose strange countenance on a recent "Late Show With David Letterman" is a YouTube sensation, has quit the film business, he said, to try his hand as a rapper. Let's hope this major talent will walk that line gingerly and reconsider.

"Two Lovers." Rated: R. Running Time: 1 hour, 48 minutes. 3.5 stars.
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