Love Is Strange

Film: Love Is Strange (94 min)
Sony Picture Classics, Distributor
Directed by Ira Sachs
Released: January, 2014 (USA)

Of all the stories we enjoy hearing and seeing in films, stories about love—or the lack of it—seem to be at the top of the list. Try to think for a moment of a film that tells a story without any love-related component. Love, of course, exists in many forms besides the one we most often associate with that emotion—romantic love. Familial love that arises fiercely from the biological bond, and friendship love that arises out of our need as humans to live associative rather than isolative lives, also inform many of the stories told over and over in the movies—movies that we actually help make simply by our participation as we watch them.

But romantic love trumps the list of themes in the hundreds of movies made with factory like components projected for our consumption in strings of theatres across the country. Most of these assembly line films about romantic love give us big overstated plots and characters that often play on the angst that such love can generate. It is a rare film that gives us a clear portrayal of deep love in an understated way. Even rarer is a film that does this about the committed love of an older same sex couple within the context of a multigenerational family setting. Love Is Strange is this kind of rare film.

George (Alfred Molina) and Ben (John Lithgow) have been together for 39 years and decide to make their committed relationship official with a legal marriage. The film opens with scenes of their wedding and the ensuing gathering with close friends and family. It is a buoyant event with George and Ben sitting at the piano singing and laughing together with the guests. A wonderful toast from the wife of Ben’s nephew cues us to the strength of the love George and Ben have shared over the years. But we are also cued, in this toast, to the relationship of Ben as a favorite uncle to his nephew and his nephew’s family, because we are about to see much more of them.

George works as a music teacher in a Catholic high school. When the news of George and Ben’s marriage reaches the Archdiocese, George is fired—for publically violating the moral code of the church. Unable to quickly find another job, George and Ben are forced to sell their condo and then move in separately with family and friends until their financial situation improves. Ben moves in with his nephew, Elliot (Darren Burrows), and his wife, Kate (Marisa Tomei), and their teenage son, Joey (Charlie Tahan). It’s a two-bedroom apartment, so Ben has to sleep in the lower bunk bed in Joey’s room. George, meanwhile, arranges to move in with two gay friends who live in the same condo building that George and Ben lived in before they lost the income from George’s teaching position. George sleeps on the couch—when he can; much of the time he has to endure the noisy and partying social life of his new hosts.
Ben faces a different set of challenges as he tries to unobtrusively fit in with the life rhythms of his nephew’s family—in a living space that has little room for a long-term guest. Kate is a writer, and trying to focus on writing while Uncle Ben is around becomes increasingly difficult. And 15-year-old Joey finds it frustrating to give up the privacy of his bedroom. The film shows us little scenes from this and other ongoing stresses that come from sharing a private space with someone you care about but who is not part of the normal family pattern. Some of these are humorous, others are mini-drama moments. They are all astutely realistic with just the right tone.

Many film creators would have been tempted to take this basic plot and turn it into a series of highly dramatic scenes that crescendo into some kind of dramatic family rupture. Or the film could have been turned into a tirade against a religion that, while espousing love, lets its rules and regulations penalize certain expressions of love. Love Is Strange takes a much more satisfying route. It simply invites viewers to observe common but intimate moments in the lives of several individuals who are facing the consequences of realities and powerful policies that are outside of their control. In doing this, the film encourages us to consider what is going on inside its characters as they cope with these circumstances. The graceful composition of the film’s scenes, along with an unhurried but purposeful pace and a reflective musical score, invites our attention to the nuances that make up our interactions with each other as complex and feelingful human beings.

And out of all this comes a powerful statement about the fabric of love in people’s lives. Love, the film seems to be saying, is a strong and nearly mystical force that we cannot always predict, thwart or contain. This is played out so subtly throughout the many relationships in the film that it takes some post viewing reflection (and, ideally, discussion) to see and appreciate it. And, happily, this theme is presented to us in a multigenerational context. We observe the characters from three generations intertwinning with occasional abrasions as they are pressed into living together. In the midst of these sometimes awkward and uncomfortable circumstances, there are also many moments of mentoring connection—like the brief conversation Uncle Ben and Joey have about love one night just before they fall asleep.

Some of the more dramatic events in the story happen off-screen—another evidence of skillfully restrained filmmaking. Some of the most poignant scenes in the film are near the end, after one these off-screen dramatic events. In these beautifully composed final scenes, it is Joey, the often petulant 15-year-old great-nephew of Ben, who encapsulates the nature of the deep connections we have with those we love.

After watching Love Is Strange you may come away, like I did, feeling curiously satisfied and enriched.

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