



A late quartet

Director: Yaron Zilberman
Country: USA
Date: 2012

A review by Giovanni Fazio for The Japan Times:

. The astonishing thing about “A Late Quartet” is that Woody Allen didn’t make it. It has the Allen look - set in a resplendent and privileged Manhattan, with lingering shots of apartment interiors; the Allen-like cast - consisting of some of the most talented actors in American cinema playing members of a renowned string quartet (Christopher Walken, Catherine Keener, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Mark Ivanir); the Allenesque issues (famous musician mom and a daughter struggling to come into her own, an older man in an affair with a much younger woman, a marriage fraying at the edges, etc.). Only, they’ve all been assembled in concert, so to speak, by director Yaron Zilberman, who adeptly brandishes his conductor’s baton.



Zilberman is by no means an Allen clone, however - in fact he adds just the sort of scope and depth that Allen prefers to sacrifice in the name of comedy, or his own, lofty depression. This isn’t to say that Zilberman is a better filmmaker, just a different one from Allen, despite the deceptive facade.

The defining thread running through “A Late Quartet” is discipline. Unlike an Allen story, none of Zilberman’s characters are willing to give up their professionalism to indulge in emotions — their own or anyone else’s. In one scene, the quartet viola player Juliette (Keener) says to her husband, second violinist Robert (Seymour Hoffman): “This isn’t about you or me ... This is about the quartet.” He doesn’t like that at all, and storms out of the taxi they were in. But he knows too well that capitulating to personal feelings of lust or jealousy, will never be as important as being part of their quartet, and that has been his lifeblood for 25 years.

Then again, the program for the quartet’s upcoming concert is Beethoven’s String Quartet No. 14, Opus 131, which is not only horrendously difficult, but seven movements long and must be played without a single pause. Needless to say, the piece requires intense concentration and unwavering commitment from every musician, so Robert really needs to get his act together. Actually the pressure for everyone is tenfold, partly because the unresolved tension and problems that have been festering in the quartet for decades are now brimming over the edges, but mainly because their leader/cellist Peter (Walken) has announced that he has Parkinson’s disease, and must retire.

While characters in an Allen film would rather wallow in the relationship thing than do a day’s work, the opposite is true for the quartet — they’re either working on their music or thinking about it, ultimately pushing everything aside for Beethoven’s opus. They fasten onto that piece like a lighthouse in a storm, even as they’re drenched by rains and threatened by thunder. The story progresses in the same way that instruments tuning-up for a concert seems like a random concession of sounds — before converging into that first soaring, comprehensive note at a concert’s beginning. There’s a sense of wonder that classical concerts still exist in our digital world, and endless gratitude for the artists who work to hone and perfect it.

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