

FILM REVIEW

Early in *(500) Days of Summer* the omniscient narrator who intermittently (and somewhat annoyingly) comments on the action cautions that the movie is "not a love story." The print advertisements qualify his words, describing this slight, charming and refreshingly candid little picture as "a story about love." Which it is: a story about how love can be confusing, contingent and asymmetrical, and about how love can fail. Given all this, it's somewhat remarkable that *(500) Days*, the feature directing debut of the music video auteur Marc Webb, is neither depressing nor French.

But it is, all the same, a fairly pointed response to the sorry state of romantic comedy in Hollywood, which runs the gamut from gauzily implausible fantasy to blatant and fatuous dishonesty, with an occasional detour into raunchy humor. The governing commercial calculus these days seems to be that dudes want smut, ladies want weddings, and a picture (like *The Hangover*, say) that delivers both will make the audience happy and the studios rich.

This dispensation means that more delicate, and perhaps more authentic, feelings and attitudes must be spoken about either with subtitles or, from time to time, in mumbles. So

a winsome, accessible movie about more-or-less recognizable young people navigating the murky waters of post-sexual-revolutionary, midrecessionary heterosexual attraction has a novelty and a measure of bravery working in its favor, whatever its shortcomings. And *(500) Days* finds just the right scale and tone, neither trivializing nor melodramatically overstating the delicate feelings it explores.

Some of the credibility that Webb's movie establishes right away comes from its unassuming and appealing stars, Zoey Deschanel and Joseph Gordon-Levitt. With his crooked smile, reedy physique and improbably deep voice, Gordon-Levitt camouflages his magnetism with diffidence, much as Deschanel uses her slightly spacey, vaguely melancholy affect to magnify the charm she is pretending to disguise. Their characters, Tom Hansen and Summer Finn, seem so ideally matched, such a cozily compatible semi-hipster couple, that it's a bit of a shock when things don't work out between them.

Don't worry; I haven't given anything away. Webb and the screenwriters, Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber, have scrambled the chronology so that Tom and Summer's meet-cute and their eventual bust-up occur, in film time, close together and near the beginning. What follows is a shuffled, teasing and ingeniously structured presentation of their romance's heady commencement, ambiguous middle and (at least for one of them) tormented aftermath. This

structure restores a measure of the suspense that is usually missing from the romantic-comedy genre, which relies on climactic chases to the airport and ridiculously contrived choices between rival mates. From the outset you know, more or less, what happened between Tom and Summer, so most of your curiosity is invested in the question of how it all came to pass.

The answers, in themselves, are not earthshakingly dramatic or even especially unusual. A workplace flirtation — Tom and

Summer are employees of a Los Angeles greeting card company — leads to a few missed chances, a sweet first kiss and fitful progress from casual to serious. Or so it seems to Tom, an unapologetic believer in true love, soul mates and other touchstones of greeting card mythology (and romantic comedy ideology). Summer is skeptical of such notions and refuses to promise commitment or even consistency, but she does seem to want more and more of Tom's company, and this leads him to believe that her carefully maintained barriers to intimacy are beginning to fall.

The design of *(500) Days* suggests a puzzle with a few crucial pieces left in the box. Some of this elusiveness comes from an admirable impulse to respect the enigmatic fluctuations of desire and infatuation. But there is also something tentative and half-finished about the film, which substitutes a few too many gimmicks — split screens, a musical number, that voice-over — for moments of real intensity or humor and seems a little afraid to make its main characters too interesting or idiosyncratic.

Instead they project a kind of generic individuality, with shared tastes that ensure a measure of compatibility — they both like the Smiths! — and divergent quirks to provide some interesting friction. (Her favorite Beatle is Ringo!) Tom, whose point of view predominates in spite of the third-person narrator, has a couple of goofy pals (Matthew Gray Gubler and Geoffrey Arend) and a wise younger sister (Chloe Grace Moretz). He also has the stymied, or at least deferred, ambition

to be an architect instead of a drone in a best-wishes factory.

One indication of the film's thinness is that Summer has no such professional or creative pursuits — she's the assistant to Tom's boss (Clark Gregg) — and no identifiable passions, friends or characteristics other than her heart-stopping desirability and her vintage-y dresses. Deschanel excels at playing this kind of cute, quasi-bohemian crush object, but after *Elf* and *Yes Man* and *All the Real Girls* it would be nice if some smitten filmmaker would write her a fully developed, less passive part.

Still, I don't want to pop the shimmering soap bubble of *(500) Days of Summer*, a movie that is, for the most part, as mopey, winningly seductive as the Regina Spektor songs on the sound track and at its best as unexpectedly lovely as the views of Los Angeles captured by Webb and his director of photography, Eric Steelberg. At first, I mistook the city for Chicago or Philadelphia or some other old-growth conurbation, and Webb, who has directed videos for artists as different as Miley Cyrus and My Chemical Romance, deserves credit for finding new and fresh perspectives on this overexposed metropolis. There are no beaches or Spanish-style bungalows in the hills, just a scruffy, comfortable atmosphere of melancholy optimism that suits Tom and Summer perfectly, in all their imperfection.

▼ Zoey Deschanel and Joseph Gordon-Levitt star in *(500) Days of Summer*, directed by Marc Webb. PHOTOS COURTESY OF FOX MOVIES

Film Notes

(500) DAYS OF SUMMER

DIRECTED BY:
MARC WEBB

STARRING:
JOSEPH GORDON-LEVITT (TOM), ZOOEY DESCHANEL (SUMMER), GEOFFREY AREND (MCKENZIE), CHLOE GRACE MORETZ (RACHEL), MATTHEW GRAY GUBLER (PAUL), CLARK GREGG (VANCE), RACHEL BOSTON (ALISON), MINKA KELLY (GIRL AT INTERVIEW)

RUNNING TIME:
1 HOUR 36 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY



Love at the greeting card company:

best wishes on your breakup

The amorous co-workers played by Zoey Deschanel and Joseph Gordon-Levitt get it on and off in *'(500) Days of Summer,'* a refreshing antidote to the facile humor and clichés usually found in romcom movies

BY A. O. SCOTT
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK



OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Wild Horse from Shangri-La (命懸800公里)

An ethnic Tibetan "boy" — who looks more like a young man, possibly even Daniel Day Lewis in *The Last of the Mohicans* — refuses to let his sister lie down and die when she is afflicted with a life-threatening condition. Nicknamed "Wild Horse" for his running prowess, our hero learns of a marathon to be held in Kunming whose first prize is just enough to cover his sister's medical expenses ... but he has to run there before he can compete. Any Chinese film with Tibetan content instantly raises red flags, but this one seems more aimed at kids than anyone else. Amusingly, and apparently without irony, the English-language trailer uses a snippet from *Run Like Hell* by Pink Floyd.



Le Secret

Possibly taking advantage of today's more permissive censorship regime, this obscure French drama has been dusted off after nine years for a release in Taiwan. An encyclopedia saleswoman does the dirty on her husband and child with (gasp) an American choreographer. He's a recluse ... but he sure knows how to push her buttons. Possibly a feature-length warning against such behavior, the way *Le Secret* is packaged is more likely to trigger mid-life crises throughout the theater. Stars Tony Todd (*Candyman*) as the illicit lover; his presence makes this worth a look.



The Triumphant Return of General Rouge

A sequel of sorts to *The Glorious Team Batista*, a Japanese hospital murder-mystery released here 18 months ago, *Rouge* places put-upon medics in a more bureaucratic fix as the government investigators from the previous installment probe dodgy budgeting and claims of unethical practices involving a surgeon gruesomely tagged "General Rouge." This has to be more entertaining than it sounds, especially as it stars Yuko Takeuchi (*Ringu, Spring Snow*) and the prolific Hiroshi Abe (*Hero*). Also known as *The Triumphant General Rouge*.



Bottle Shock

This is based on a true story of a clever wine taste test in 1976 that saw French judges unwittingly declare an American wine to be superior. Alan Rickman plays an elite British wine merchant in Paris who sets up the competition. Bill Pullman is the eccentric winemaker in Napa, Chris Pine is Pullman's maturing son and co-worker and Dennis Farina is Rickman's loyal customer and cheerleader. This film was in the cellar for more than a year before securing a release here, but its dividends should be no less bountiful.



Phobia 2

The original *Phobia* was a Thai compendium of four horror tales; in English it was also called *4bia*. But Thai audiences were not at all phobic about seeing it, hence this energetic sequel, which offers a bonus fifth tale of fear. Sinister religious practices and figures, zombie attacks, murderous vehicles and ghosts enter the frame in a selection that pleased audiences and critics, claiming the highest-grossing Thai horror movie crown.



Twin Daggers

Shades of *Kill Bill* at the Baixue in Ximending this week as the latest DVD promo gets a run in this most inelegant of theaters. Aussie journeyman Rhett Giles stars as "Scholar," a chappie who spends more time unraveling assassin intrigue and kicking butt than producing refereed publications. He joins a number of other would-be killers hired by a sultry lady (Coco Su) to off her identical twin (Coco Su again) before things start getting really complicated. This derivative Chinese production starts tomorrow.

