

Chloe

Atom Egoyan is probably Canada's most versatile screenwriter/director. No comedian, he somberly investigates tough questions of identity, sexuality, history, and politics. Probably best known for his probing 1997 drama "The Sweet Hereafter," Egoyan typically offers a collection of disparate personages whose lives gradually, tellingly intersect.

His latest, "Chloe," is a departure for him in that he did not write the screenplay but used a scenario adapted from a French original. It appears to be an attempt to enter the larger commercial market outside the Canadian art film, using major, non-Canadian stars in a sexual thriller format. Though efficient and glossy, it remains to be seen whether this slick drama will find a wide audience.

"Chloe" has star power: the title character, a stunning call girl, is played by the hot Amanda Seyfried, seen lately in films like "Mama Mia" and "Dear John" and the HBO TV series "Big Love." It also stars the very skilled Julianne Moore (most recently in "A

Simple Man") and Irish actor Liam Neeson ("Taken").

The Stuarts are a tony Toronto couple of means and class whose marriage has turned arid. A telling line in the film has one of them asking: "When did we stop picking each other up at the airport?" Catherine (Moore) is a successful gynecologist while David (Neeson) is an easy-going, popular professor at the local university. They have a troubled, but talented son, Michael. The



story opens with Catherine preparing an elaborate 50th surprise birthday party for David at their opulent home on a day when David is delivering a lecture (on "Don Giovanni" and his conquest of women) in New York. He misses his plane ride back and the party is ruined, then Catherine soon discovers, from a cell phone message, that David may have had an affair in New York and was delayed for that reason.

Later, at a posh restaurant, Catherine runs into Chloe (there with a client) in the ladies' room, and they quickly bond. Learning of Chloe's profession, Catherine asks if she might test her husband's loyalty by having Chloe entice David into a liaison. Indeed, Chloe reports on their initial connection in a coffee shop then continues to recount—more and more graphically (this is where the "R" rating comes in—how their lovemaking is proceeding. Catherine receives these accounts with a mixture of shame, disgust, and, ultimately, fascination. She, too, becomes sucked into the vortex of Chloe's allure, only to be repelled when Chloe makes a move on her sensitive Michael. Torn between learning grim truths and her inchoate desire, Catherine has to finally confront David with his unfaithfulness and learn how to deal with Chloe.

“Chloe” ends with two big twisteroos (not revealed here!): one is a well-crafted and legitimate doozy which turns the story on its head, while the second is a cliché, predictable, melodramatic, and unnecessary.

For folks who want to see an up-scale Toronto, this film will do. The Stuarts’ world is luxurious, glistening, and very nicely color coordinated. Chloe, too, plies her trade in high class hotels and handsome eateries. Both the Stuart’s home and Dr. Stuart’s office cry out: classy rich! At the same time, the film’s look and décor are chilly, underscoring the increasing barrenness of the Stuart’s union.

Julianne Moore excels in films of a contained woman undergoing high anxiety (e.g., “Safe,” “The Hours,” “The End of the Affair,” and “Far From Heaven”). She is in that mode again here and is by far the best thing in “Chloe.” She makes what could be merely histrionic seem genuinely wrenching. Her halting investigation of her husband, her fraught relationship with Chloe, her genuine concern for her fragile son—all these she conveys deftly with troubled gesture, expression, and body language. This is a woman losing it, and we see, all too precisely, how her ordered world is coming apart.

Liam Neeson has less to do; his life is shown in patches, much of them based on Chloe’s re-tellings. Still, he gives off the right vibes of a congenial, yet possibly duplicitous charmer. Problematical is the word, however, for Chloe herself. Though Seyfried is certainly fetching, I finally cannot buy her as a high-class call girl: too callow perhaps, too gorgeous by half for the work, too dreamy to be conniving. Her lack of weight makes the film unbalanced, her slightness never meriting Catherine’s Gethsemane.

Photo: Julianne Moore (right) first encounters Amanda Seyfried in “Chloe.” Photo by Rafy, courtesy Sony Pictures Classics

(Runs 96 mins., rated R for strong sexual content.)

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