

La La Land

The Christmas season witnesses an intriguing re-booting the classic Hollywood musical. “La La Land” is a revisiting of the Astaire/Rogers/Kelly/Garland era through the lives and loves of two aspiring performer/creators, Mia (Emma Stone) and Sebastian (Ryan Gosling), trying to make it in contemporary Los Angeles as an author/actress and a jazz entrepreneur, respectively. The production, the players, the locations—all are winsome. But there is something lacking in the most crucial elements: expert song and dance.

In his second feature, filmmaker Damien Chazelle (who helmed the tense, drum-driven “Whiplash” in 2013) guides his leads in singing and dancing across a magical—at times fantastical--LA landscape, the latter serving as virtually another character in the picture. Chazelle here is unabashedly playing homage to the classic musicals, testing to see whether today’s audiences will buy their conventions.

For this reviewer, the fundamental questions are two: whether non-musicians Stone and Gosling are capable of warbling and waltzing, and whether the wholly original music and lyrics by composer Justin Hurwitz are apt and memorable. Here, young Damien is bucking a long-term trend and, I am afraid to say, he doesn’t quite pull it off.

Perhaps it’s because your reviewer—of a certain age—grew up with the classic musicals Chazelle reveres and finds this homage simply cannot match those earlier models, which are part of my cinematic DNA. As lovely as LA looks (beautifully filmed by cinematographer Linus Sandgren) and as attractive as the leads are, two of Hollywood’s hottest stars—the musical fails in the most important way: musically.

It may not be fair to compare Stone-Gosling to Hollywood greats, but they have put themselves out front and should be considered on their merits. Both are given touchstone songs to sing: Stone is very exposed musically in her big solo “Audition,” and Gosling, while strolling on a nocturnal dock, wistfully sings “City of Stars” (which Hurwitz signals as the movie’s theme). While touching, neither performance dazzles because the voices are not trained and reveal a forced delivery. Again, the comparison may not be fair, but the old timers just **put over a song** better. My guess is that no one will be humming Hurwitz’s tunes in 2017.

Similar with their terpsichorean efforts: both actors try manfully to put on some smooth dance moves, especially during a lavish production number set high above a glittering LA. The choreography and the movement within it are dutiful--not stunning, only decent—but not electric. Maybe I’m just asking too much.

Not to say that Chazelle hasn’t show some real class in “La La Land.” The film opens with “Another Day of Sun,” a brilliant number of singers and dancers all initially stalled in a massive LA traffic jam then bursting our in praise of their town. The number resonates even more because such an incident, which would normally have locals red with rage, shows them blithely singing and dancing up a storm. It’s a fine metaphor for the positive tenor the picture wants to create. It’s just too bad the principal figures are not quite up to standard.

(The film is rated “PG-13” and runs 128 mins.)

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