

Loving Vincent

If you are looking for something completely different at the movies, check out “Loving Vincent.” It is an elaborately animated artistic whodunit, the puzzle here being to learn the real circumstances of the untimely death of the painter Vincent Van Gogh in 1890.

A young man, Arnaud, son of the postman in the Village of Auvers-sur-Oise, where Van Gogh spent the last months of his life, is driven to find out how and why the painter died and plays the sleuth around town, interviewing people who knew the artist and trying to construct a theory of his demise. In doing so, he inevitably talks to the figures familiar to us from Van Gogh’s portraits, from Arnaud’s own father, the painter’s physician and his daughter, the maid from his hostel, a boatman, a housekeeper, *inter alia*. These key personages are mostly played by an array of English actors familiar to viewers of British film and TV, players such as Douglas Booth, Chris O’Dowd, Helen McCrory, Aidan Turner, Saoirse Ronan, Eleanor Tomlinson, and others. The filmgoer can play a kind of guessing game to see if he recognizes the individual actor from his animated version. (Note: in flashback scenes Vincent himself is voiced by a Polish actor, Robert Gulaczyk.)

But the slim plot of this film is hardly the principal reason to see it. That reason is a unique cinematic effort of five years by Polish animator Dorota Kobiela and English producer Hugh Welchman. This tour-de-force required the painting of 65,000 images, representing every frame of the feature-length film. Most of the more than 120 painters who painted the images were based in Danzig, Poland, but dozens had to be recruited from other countries to complete the work. Once the script was ready, the laborious “rotoscoping” process began with months of shooting the story with the real actors performing in costume against a “green screen,” which imagery was later converted to landscapes and interiors in the Van Gogh style, many of these recognizable from his most famous paintings. The actors’ images were likewise copied on to individual canvases by each painter, frame by meticulous frame.

Fans of the painter will recognize many of Van Gogh’s iconic works in the picture such as the “The Yellow House,” “The Starry Night,” “The Night Café,” “Girl in White,” and numerous portraits of his friends and acquaintances, but all flowing into the action. Since the story is of his last, troubled, but amazingly productive years, the imagery evoked is principally from that period, 1888-90.

The filmmakers also decided to show flashback sequences in black-and-white, a choice that changes the film’s tone. Because we have no “black-and-white” Van Goghs, these sections do not attempt to mimic his famous flurried brushwork but rather photographic material of the time. While the visualization achieved in these scenes is often striking in itself, the flavor and momentum of the story droops a bit, while the abundance of the swirling Vincent style in full color and motion is always exhilarating.

The better one knows and admires Van Gogh’s work, the more likely they are to cherish this labor of love dedicated to this unique artist.

(The film is rated PG-13 and runs 94 minutes.)

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