

Two Lovers

James Gray is a writer/director who makes movies on a intimate scale, usually in a favored location (Brooklyn), with plots featuring young men struggling with and against complex family dynamics. Also consistent in his work is the presence of Joaquin Phoenix, who has had lead roles in his last three films, *The Yards* (2000), *We Own the Night* (2007), and now *Two Lovers*. In fact, Phoenix has recently—and loudly--announced he is retiring from movie-making to perform hip hop, so this may be his last screen effort. If so, it is a decent send off for the actor.

Phoenix plays Leonard Kraditor, a troubled and aimless man who is back living with his parents (Isabella Rossellini and Moni Moshonov) in their Brighton Beach apartment after a thwarted engagement and a failed suicide. In fact, as the film opens, he is making another half-hearted suicide attempt as a kind of break from his dead-end job in his dad's dry cleaners.

Circumstances combine to thrust two intriguing women into his life. Sandra (Vinessa Shaw) is the lovely Jewish daughter of the prospective buyer/partner of his father's business, and she becomes intrigued by Leonard's taciturn, but suggestive, background (a failed love, a knack for photography). Then Leonard encounters, living in his same building, a stunning blonde Michelle (Gwyneth Paltrow) who has mystery about her and who sees Leonard as a kind of soulmate who will understand her dilemma (she's in love with her older married boss). Leonard is respectful and appreciative of the one (his parents approve) but utterly smitten with the other...

How this triangle resolves itself is the core of *Two Lovers*. Gray's pedestrian, worn-down Brooklyn landscapes add weight to the film's reality, and his pacing and tone are appropriately just this side of somber. But especially, he orchestrates a team of believable characters, devoid of stereotype and easy reads. Even the small role of Michelle's lover, a city lawyer (Elias Koteas), is handled with a deft and knowing touch. One might wonder—as this reviewer did—how the rather schlubby Leonard could wind up with two such babes interested in him, but, hey...maybe there is no accounting for taste.

The viewer of *Two Lovers* might, in a good way, end up as befuddled as Leonard is by what to do next—what to tell his mom, how to treat Sandra, what kind of work to aspire to, how to capture Michelle--how to make sense of his life. How his story finally does work itself out might seem a tad too neat for a life that has been anything but, yet it does work itself out, not predictably but feeling right. (*The film is rated "R" for sexual material and runs 110 mins.*)

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