

Film Review: A Burning Hot Summer

French New Wave chic can't save this emotionally uninvolving drama of two young couples.

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Reviews



Like an old rock song that used to be a favorite and now sounds past its prime, or an apartment that used to be swinging and now badly needs a paint job and new furniture, watching Philippe Garrel's *A Burning Hot Summer* has a sweet retro taste of the Nouvelle Vague that soon turns insipid. Set in present-day Paris and Rome and, gasp, shot in color, this drama of two couples (one separates, the other doesn't) is dramatically

lifeless and uninvolving. Fans of Garrel, a two-time Silver Lion winner in Venice for directing *I Can No Longer Hear the Guitar* and *Regular Lovers*, may enjoy the self-reference of toplineers Louis Garrel (the director's son) and Monica Bellucci, who play off their iconic images, but there isn't much more to pin down even specialized audiences.

The whole story is told as a flashback by an off-camera narrator, after Frédéric (Louis Garrel) commits suicide in his car in the opening scene. Working with his regular co-writer Marc Cholodenko, director Garrel weaves strands of his other films through this tenuous chronicle of love and friendship. Two bit players (played by two real-life bit players in *Regular Lovers*, Jérôme Robart and Céline Sallette) meet on the film set of what looks like a terrible French Resistance movie. They flirt, *coucher*, and start living together in Paul's (Robart) cold-water flat. Paul is a shaggy-haired revolutionary and has no money; Elisabeth (Sallette) has made suicide attempts and has an immense need for love.

One day Paul is introduced to the rich, ultra-cool artist Frédéric and improbably becomes his "best friend." Frédéric invites Paul and his girlfriend to stay with him and his Italian actress wife Angèle (Bellucci) in Rome. The two couples seem to have nothing in common, with the penniless wannabe actors Paul and Elisabeth living like parasites on their glam friends. The hungry, bored Angèle and Frédéric, each two-timing the other, use them as witnesses and confidantes to their quarrels.

Perhaps shallowness is the point about these characters; otherwise, there isn't much rhyme or reason to the goings-on, and certainly no emotional reality in the tears that flow too easily from the eyes of Garrel's posturing, self-centered Frédéric or in Angèle's ridiculous urge, while she's in bed with her lover, to go to church and pray. Bellucci captures the character's vapidness, along with her self-indulgent sensuality, in a long, hypnotic dance sequence in which she lets herself go.

As the awkward, insecure Paul and Elisabeth, Robart and Sallette act (perhaps deliberately?) like extras uncomfortably thrust into leading roles, and neither leaves a particularly deep impression.

Finally abandoning the black-and-white cinematography of his recent work, Garrel entrusts D.P. Willy Kurant and production designer Manu de Chauvigny with heavily saturated '60s-looking colors for the interiors, reserving a little breathing space on the Roman summer streets and an airy Fellini-like film set (the film's second behind-the-scenes movie reference).