

On “Just a Sigh”
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I suppose to the world, the 2014 French-and-English language film “Just a Sigh” is three-and-a-half, perhaps four, stars out of five. But to me personally, its five stars. I can’t get enough of it. I purchased it from Amazon, watched it again last night and it worked yet again for me, and I’m still thinking about it this morning, which prompted me to write this thought/review.

What’s up for me with this film?

A big thing, one hour-and-forty-five minutes in the company of Emmanuelle Devos. Marvelous screen actress. Gorgeous, super sexy, best hair on the planet. Zowie. I’d pay money to watch her cook breakfast.

Wonderful location, photography, and music. Paris (compared to a two-room rented apartment in Burlington, Vermont). Every shot perfectly positioned and lit to tell the story; and unobtrusively, the camera doesn’t upstage what’s going with the characters. Classical music gives “Just a Sigh” a, well, classy quality; and it contributes in on-the-money fashion to the tone and context of each scene; and it lends a timelessness, universality, to the film, this could have taken place in the ‘70s, the ‘40s, any time.

The characters and story intrigue me. Contemporary times, Alix, a French woman in her early forties, theater actress, tracks down and emotionally lassos and hogties an early-sixties English academic (played very nicely by Gabriel Byrne) in a single afternoon while she’s in Paris from the nearby town of Calais where she’s performing in an Ibsen play for an audition and he’s in Paris for a funeral. How does she do it, and just as big a question, is she for real? She’s an actress; is this some kind of an improvisation performance for her, and if it is, does she fully realize that fact? And if it’s acting, is it the kind of acting that, whether we realize it or not, all of us do in the various “scenes” that comprise our lives? When Douglas, the Byrne character,

twice asks Alix whether, since she is an actress, he can believe her, without directly answering his questions, she notes that he acts with his students, and more, that simply as a man he acts.

In any case, the difference in Alix's personas in her various contexts over the span of the film, an evening and the next day until 6:00 p.m., is striking: in a theater as she performs the play; in her phone conversation that evening with her documentary filmmaker boyfriend and in her attempts to contact him the next day by phone and by dropping by his apartment and in her last, end-of-the film, phone conversation with him; in two contrasting readings of her audition scene; in her snappish exchange with a café worker over her lack of money to pay her bill; in her conversations with her mother on the phone; in a volatile exchange with her sister; in her chance connection with an attendee at the funeral (like Douglas, older, but unlike Douglas, unattractive and wordy, boring); and in her time with Douglas. As I wrote out the list of Alix's contacts in this last sentence, it struck me how much we get to see of her in this film.

It's primarily Devos/Alix's movie, but increasingly the Douglas character interests me. Sixty-three; not yet geriatric but on the brink. A time of life when, if there's anything going to happen with younger women, they have to come on to you, as Alix did. You don't put a move on a younger woman at this age, creepy. While old, Douglas is still attractive and appealing to some women (think Gabriel Byrne). But how about if it had been seven years later, when he was seventy? Quite likely at that point in his life, to an Alix he would have entered the realm of invisible old men.

How vulnerable and needy Douglas comes across. Why? The film alludes to possibilities. Compromised by the personal diminishment and limited opportunities and horizons brought on by age. An unsatisfying and draining marriage (he might have married the woman whose funeral he came to attend if she had reciprocated his feelings for her). Having not achieved his goals as a writer. A career in teaching, trying to connect with preoccupied

students who stay the same age while, year by year, he got older and farther removed from them. Being resented by now-grown children. Whatever accounted for it, including just his basic nature, Douglas was exceedingly passive and self-deprecating throughout his encounters with Alix. As she was about to get on the train to return to Calais for that evening's performance of her play, he went so far as to invite this woman whom he'd only known a few hours to return to England with him.

Putting together this review has gotten me feeling even stronger about the film—there is indeed a lot going on here—and about encouraging you, especially if you're feeling on the down-slope of life as I am, to check it out.