

(500) Days of Summer: Everyone's a Critic

Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*: **** / ****

We never remember in chronological order, especially when we're going back over a failed romance. We start near the end, and then hop around between the times that were good and the times that left pain. People always say "start at the beginning," but we didn't know at the time it was the beginning. *(500) Days of Summer* is a movie that works that way.

Some say they're annoyed by the way it begins on Day 488 or whatever and then jumps around, providing utterly unhelpful data labels: "Day 1," "Day 249." Movies are supposed to reassure us that events unfold in an orderly procession. But Tom remembers his love, Summer, as a series of joys and bafflements. What kind of woman likes you perfectly sincerely and has no one else in her life but is not interested in ever getting married?

Zoey Deschanel is a good choice to play such a woman. I can't imagine her playing a clinging vine. Too ornery. As Summer, she sees Tom with a level gaze and is who she is. It's Tom's bad luck she is sweet and smart and beautiful – it's not an act. She is always scrupulously honest with him. She is her own person, and Tom can't have her.

Have you known someone like that? In romance, we believe what we want to believe. That's the reason *(500) Days of Summer* is so appealing. Tom is in love with Summer from the moment he sees her. His thoughts on love may not run as deeply as, say, those of the Romantic poets. He writes greeting cards, and you suspect he may believe his own cards. It's amazing people get paid for a job like that. I could do it: "Love is a rose, and you are its petals." Summer is his boss's new assistant. She likes his looks, and makes her move one day over the Xerox machine.

Can he accept that she simply likes him for now, not for forever? The movie, which is a delightful comedy, alive with invention, is about Tom wrestling with that reality. The director Marc Webb seems to be casting about for templates from other movies to help him tell this story; that's not desperation, but playfulness. There's a little black and white, a little musical number, a little Fellini, which is always helpful in evoking a man in the act of yearning. Tom spends this movie in the emotional quandary of Mastroianni in *La Dolce Vita*, his hand always outstretched toward his inaccessible fantasies.

Summer remains mysterious all through the film, perhaps because we persist with Tom in expecting her to cave in. When we realize she is not required to in this movie, because it's not playing by the Hollywood rules, we perk up; anything could happen. The kaleidoscopic time structure breaks the shackles of the three-act grid and thrashes about with the freedom of romantic confusion.

One thing men love is to instruct women. If a woman wants to enchant a man, she is wise to play his pupil. Men fall for this. Tom set out in life to be an architect, not a poet of greeting cards. He and Summer share the same favorite view of Los Angeles (one you may not have seen before), and he conducts for her an architectural tour. This is fun not because we get to see wonderful buildings, but because so rarely in the movies do we find characters arguing for their aesthetic values. What does your average character played by an A-list star believe about truth and beauty? Has Jason Bourne ever gone to a museum on his day off?

Joseph Gordon-Levitt has acted in a lot of movies, ranging from one of the *Halloween* sequels to the indie gem *Brick*. He comes into focus here playing a believable, likable guy, hopeful, easily disappointed, a little Tom Hanks-ian. He is strong enough to expect love, weak enough to be hurt. Zooey Deschanel evokes that ability in some women to madden you with admiration while never seeming to give it the slightest thought. She also had that quality in the overlooked *Gigantic*, although the movie's peculiar supporting characters obscured it.

Tom opens the film by announcing it will not be your typical love story. Are you like me, and when you realize a movie is on autopilot you get impatient with it? How long can the characters pretend they don't know how the story will end? Here is a rare movie that begins by telling us how it will end and is about how the hero has no idea why.

A.O. Scott, *New York Times*

Early in *(500) Days of Summer*, the omniscient narrator who intermittently (and somewhat annoyingly) comments on the action cautions that the movie is "not a love story." The print advertisements qualify his words, describing this slight, charming and refreshingly candid little picture as "a story about love." Which it is: a story about how love can be confusing, contingent and asymmetrical, and about how love can fail. Given all this, it's somewhat remarkable that *(500) Days*, the feature directing debut of the music video auteur Marc Webb, is neither depressing nor French.

But it is, all the same, a fairly pointed response to the sorry state of romantic comedy in Hollywood, which runs the gamut from gauzily implausible fantasy to blatant and fatuous dishonesty, with an occasional detour into raunchy humor. The governing commercial calculus these days seems to be that dudes want smut, ladies want weddings, and a picture (like *The Hangover*, say) that delivers both will make the audience happy and the studios rich.

This dispensation means that more delicate, and perhaps more authentic, feelings and attitudes must be spoken about either with subtitles or, from time to time, in mumbles. So a winsome, accessible movie about more-or-less recognizable young people navigating the murky waters of post-sexual-revolutionary, mid-recessionary heterosexual attraction has a novelty and a measure of bravery working in its favor, whatever its shortcomings. And *(500) Days* finds just the right scale and tone, neither trivializing nor melodramatically overstating the delicate feelings it explores.

Some of the credibility that Mr. Webb's movie establishes right away comes from its unassuming and appealing stars, Zooey Deschanel and Joseph Gordon-Levitt. With his crooked smile, reedy physique and improbably deep voice, Mr. Gordon-Levitt camouflages his magnetism with diffidence, much as Ms. Deschanel uses her slightly spacey, vaguely melancholy affect to magnify the charm she is pretending to disguise. Their characters, Tom Hansen and Summer Finn, seem so ideally matched, such a cozily compatible semi-hipster couple, that it's a bit of a shock when things don't work out between them.

Don't worry; I haven't given anything away. Mr. Webb and the screenwriters, Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber, have scrambled the chronology so that Tom and Summer's meet-cute and their eventual bust-up occur, in film time, close together and near the beginning. What follows is a shuffled, teasing and ingeniously structured presentation of their romance's heady commencement,

ambiguous middle and (at least for one of them) tormented aftermath. This structure restores a measure of the suspense that is usually missing from the romantic-comedy genre, which relies on climactic chases to the airport and ridiculously contrived choices between rival mates. From the outset you know, more or less, what happened between Tom and Summer, so most of your curiosity is invested in the question of how it all came to pass.

The answers, in themselves, are not earthshakingly dramatic or even especially unusual. A workplace flirtation — Tom and Summer are employees of a Los Angeles greeting card company — leads to a few missed chances, a sweet first kiss and fitful progress from casual to serious. Or so it seems to Tom, an unapologetic believer in true love, soul mates and other touchstones of greeting card mythology (and romantic comedy ideology). Summer is skeptical of such notions and refuses to promise commitment or even consistency, but she does seem to want more and more of Tom's company, and this leads him to believe that her carefully maintained barriers to intimacy are beginning to fall.

The design of *(500) Days* suggests a puzzle with a few crucial pieces left in the box. Some of this elusiveness comes from an admirable impulse to respect the enigmatic fluctuations of desire and infatuation. But there is also something tentative and half-finished about the film, which substitutes a few too many gimmicks — split screens, a musical number, that voice-over — for moments of real intensity or humor and seems a little afraid to make its main characters too interesting or idiosyncratic.

Instead they project a kind of generic individuality, with shared tastes that ensure a measure of compatibility — they both like the Smiths! — and divergent quirks to provide some interesting friction. (Her favorite Beatle is Ringo!) Tom, whose point of view predominates in spite of the third-person narrator, has a couple of goofy pals (Matthew Gray Gubler and Geoffrey Arend) and a wise younger sister (Chloë Grace Moretz). He also has the stymied, or at least deferred, ambition to be an architect instead of a drone in a best-wishes factory.

One indication of the film's thinness is that Summer has no such professional or creative pursuits — she's the assistant to Tom's boss (Clark Gregg) — and no identifiable passions, friends or characteristics other than her heart-stopping desirability and her vintage-y dresses. Ms. Deschanel excels at playing this kind of cute, quasi-bohemian crush object, but after *Elf* and *Yes Man* and *All the Real Girls* it would be nice if some smitten filmmaker would write her a fully developed, less passive part.

Still, I don't want to pop the shimmering soap bubble of *(500) Days of Summer*, a movie that is, for the most part, as mopily, winningly seductive as the Regina Spektor songs on the soundtrack and at its best as unexpectedly lovely as the views of Los Angeles captured by Mr. Webb and his director of photography, Eric Steelberg. At first, I mistook the city for Chicago or Philadelphia or some other old-growth conurbation, and Mr. Webb, who has directed videos for artists as different as Miley Cyrus and My Chemical Romance, deserves credit for finding new and fresh perspectives on this overexposed metropolis. There are no beaches or Spanish-style bungalows in the hills, just a scruffy, comfortable atmosphere of melancholy optimism that suits Tom and Summer perfectly, in all their imperfection.

Margy Rochlin: *Instant Chemistry, Belated Dance Number*

For all the usual flirting glances, headlong swooning, breaking up, reuniting, kissing, crying, pained longing and drunken karaoke that take place in *(500) Days of Summer*, it is still being marketed as an unconventional date movie. But recently at an echoey sound stage here the film's director, Marc Webb, and its two young stars, Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Zooey Deschanel, were in the throes of a different kind of affair. In this particular love story a young filmmaker and a pair of busy actors offered to make a promotional music video for their movie free of charge just because they enjoy one another's company. Besides, Mr. Webb said, there was a blunder of his that needed to be corrected.

"I made the horrible mistake of doing a dance sequence in *(500) Days of Summer* without Zooey," the rumpled, blue-jeaned Mr. Webb said. "This is an error I will never make again." He was referring to an exuberant scene in which Mr. Gordon-Levitt's character begins dancing outdoors to express his giddy, post-tryst emotions and is soon joined by a marching band, a chirping animated bluebird and a flotilla of toe-tapping strangers.

Since childhood Ms. Deschanel has been a fan of old-school movie musicals like *Gigi*, *The Band Wagon*, and *Meet Me in St. Louis*, with big, splashy production numbers. "I love to dance," explained Ms. Deschanel, who then imitated her behavior on the day that a big crowd of extras stood behind Mr. Gordon-Levitt and duplicated his every jubilant hip shake and elbow fling. "I kept going, 'What's happening with the dance?'" she said, recreating a very sad, very tiny voice.

While *(500) Days of Summer* might not have fulfilled Ms. Deschanel's Vincente Minnelli-esque fantasies — an oversight corrected in the promotional video — it offered the ethereal-looking 29-year-old actress other opportunities. There is something refreshing, for example, about her being shyly courted on screen by Mr. Gordon-Levitt, 28, rather than the much older leading men — Will Ferrell in *Elf*, Jim Carrey in *Yes Man* — she has been paired with lately.

"It's one of the strange things about being a woman," Ms. Deschanel admitted, then said to Mr. Gordon-Levitt, with whom she's been friends since 2000, when they worked together in the low-budget movie *Manic*: "If you were paired up with Demi Moore, it would be a thing. But with a girl, it is different."

Written by Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber, *(500) Days of Summer* is the story of Tom Hansen (Mr. Gordon-Levitt), a sensitive but emotionally unformed greeting card writer who is bedazzled by Summer Finn (Ms. Deschanel), a pale, radiant dream girl who works as a secretary at his office. The movie opens at the end of their relationship, rewinds to the beginning, then ricochets among various points in the year and a half that Tom's every waking thought is of Summer.

In a way, the film's fluctuating timeline seemed like less of a hurdle than a conceit that's proposed early on: that Los Angeles — where Tom and Summer live — is one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Lush cinematography and charming locations in historic downtown Los Angeles help back up this claim. But it doesn't hurt that Ms. Deschanel and Mr. Gordon-Levitt are both native Angelenos who know every inch of their sprawling hometown, from the ugly, gray areas to the neighborhoods that are postcard scenic.

"I think there are so many films that romanticize New York in that way, but it's not like a perfect city," Ms. Deschanel said. "It's dirty, and if you blow your nose, there's dirt coming out."

Mr. Gordon-Levitt, who is best known for his role as an adolescent extraterrestrial on *3rd Rock from the Sun*, said: “I didn’t really start to appreciate what was beautiful or aesthetically pleasing about L.A. until I moved to New York when I was 19. I’d come back to visit, and I’d be like: ‘You know what? There’s something really nice about driving through the canyons and singing as loud as I want, alone in my car.’”

Mr. Webb suggested, “You can do that in the subway.”

Ms. Deschanel said, “People do,” then threw back her head and laughed.

In this moment, as the three joked easily with one another, it’s not hard to see why Mr. Webb knew immediately that Ms. Deschanel, who exudes a deadpan, off-kilter confidence, and Mr. Gordon-Levitt, who is subdued and earnest, would have a quiet, screwball chemistry. “To me the theme of this movie is that happiness lies not in the big, blue eyes of the beautiful girl,” Mr. Webb said.

Picking up his director’s thought, Mr. Gordon-Levitt said: “Tom is somebody who expects the world to work the way he’s been told, that he and Summer will end up together and live happily ever after, and that that will solve everything. In one of the first meetings I had with Marc he said, ‘This is a coming-of-age story masquerading as a romantic comedy.’”

And what lesson would a more conventional Hollywood relationship movie convey? Mr. Webb replied, “If you wax your back and learn to dance, you’ll date a model.”

When *(500) Days of Summer* opens on Friday, it will mark the feature directorial debut of Mr. Webb, who made his name in the world of commercials and music videos. In one of them — “Goodnight Goodnight” by Maroon 5 — he employed a split screen to show how a man and woman interact during their romance and after it falls apart.

In *(500) Days* he uses this same technique, wringing emotion from a rooftop party scene in which a dejected Tom hopes to reunite with Summer. Mr. Webb divides the screen in half to show how Tom’s evening plays out, juxtaposing the way he imagines it (labeled “Expectation”) with how it goes horribly awry (marked “Reality”).

“It was sort of like a Beta, like a test,” Mr. Webb said of the Maroon 5 video, “so that when I shot it I had a better idea of how it worked.” He added, “But don’t tell them that.”

Of course making a movie is one thing; dealing with the responses to it is another. Ms. Deschanel still doesn’t know what to think about the reactions of some interviewers to the seeming reversal of gender roles in *(500) Days of Summer*: Summer is uninterested in romantic commitment, and Tom can’t wait to start nesting. Some male journalists have asked her, “Why is Summer such a b----?”

“I sort of take it personally,” Ms. Deschanel said, looking distressed, “because she was upfront with Tom at the beginning, and because I think we did a good job of not making her seem like that.” Trying to console her, Mr. Webb explained why a man just might react like that. “Zooey,” he said, “they’re just not used to a movie where they don’t win.”