

TORIE (CONT'D)

[Home](#)

[Contact](#)

[Previous Contributors](#)





NOVEMBER 15, 2014 by KEITH UHLICH

The Single Take

□ THE SINGLE TAKE

□ ALFRED MOLINA, IRA SACHS, JOHN LITHGOW, KEITH UHLICH, LOVE IS STRANGE, MAKE WAY FOR TOMORROW, THE SINGLE TAKE, TOKYO STORY

Love Is Strange

This is a column about a friend—writer-director Ira Sachs, who I’ve known personally since I interviewed him prior to the release of his wonderful second feature, the Memphis-based kept woman melodrama *Forty Shades of Blue* (2005). I’d loved his previous film, *The Delta* (1996), as well; as I recall, it was *NYP*Press-era Armond White who put this story of the tender, tragic and queer-tinged relationship between a rich white teen and a poor Vietnamese immigrant on my radar. And I’ve been a proponent of almost everything he’s done since—as much as those strange bedfellows that are criticism and friendship will allow.

Love Is Strange, Ira’s latest, strikes me as his best movie, possessed of all the piercing humanity that characterizes his work, though more powerfully distilled. (It’s the first to make me cry.) In structure and certain sequencing it recalls two cinematic pinnacles, Leo McCarey’s *Make Way for Tomorrow* (1937) and Yasujiro Ozu’s *Tokyo Story* (1953), each of which follows a married couple at a crossroads. *Tokyo Story* is also a loose remake of *Make Way*, so Ira’s film plays, on one of its many levels, as the latest transposition, borrowing and filtering elements of the preceding works while honing its own unique voice.

The spouses are Ben (John Lithgow) and George (Alfred Molina), two men who, in the joyous opening scene, tie the knot after 39 years together. This is Manhattan 2013—where people of the same gender can finally wed legally, though bastions of the moral old guard remain. George teaches choir at a local Catholic school and his marriage goes against religious doctrine. Even though he’s been open about his relationship with Ben (a retired teacher and career painter), the wedding itself is a fireable offense. He’s let go, which throws off the pair’s ordered life: Without George’s salary, the apartment they live in is unaffordable. They have to sell and, while looking for somewhere else to live, need a place to stay.

That’s the extent of things. “It’s not a big deal...but it is serious,” says one of the film’s peripheral characters—not referring to Ben and George’s plight but to another matter. Those words, however, could serve as *Love Is Strange*’s mantra. Ben and George’s situation is an accumulation of minor aggravations. They’re forced to live in separate residences: Ben in the Brooklyn home of filmmaker Elliot (Darren E. Burrows) and novelist Kate (Marisa Tomei), where he camps out on the bunk bed of their moody teen son Joey (Charlie Tahan). George in the NYC residence of gay cops Ted (Cheyenne Jackson) and Roberto (Manny Perez), which bustles with activity—rarely a moment’s peace. They also have to navigate the labyrinthine real estate market, with its myriad taxes, fees, waiting lists, and a lawyer who flashes a faux-conciliatory smile as he explains where all the money from their apartment sale went.

“It’s like something out of Kafka,” says George, though the film never tips into all-encroaching nightmarishness, instead maintaining an aura of probing gentility (paralleled by the score, which is entirely made up of compositions by Frédéric Chopin) even when Ben and George are at their lowest. They’re not mere victims, either. Ben’s presence in Elliot, Kate and Joey’s lives becomes an increasing annoyance. In one agonizing scene, he unwittingly distracts Kate from her work, and she does everything possible to talk around the situation, hoping he takes the hint. And George tends to sit and stew whenever Ted and Roberto socialize; he’s like a dying houseplant pushed off into the corner, its withered state intentionally unacknowledged.

LOVE IS STRANGE

All little indignities: Ben and George's bond is never fully threatened, but it is tested, as they themselves test others with needs, wants and idiosyncrasies that have been shaped over a lifetime. I've always loved the way Ira trusts in ellipsis as a storytelling tool—the power of things skipped over as much as things seen. We never see George and Ben move out of their beloved apartment; suddenly they're just in entirely new spaces, forced to acclimate, and we with them. That the mood is gentle doesn't mitigate this very specific story's emotional turmoil. When George shows up unannounced on Elliot and Kate's doorstep, so distraught is he to have his husband denied to him by circumstance, the two men's embrace feels epochal—a breathtaking respite (supported by the film's architecture and Lithgow and Molina's lived-in chemistry) within a maelstrom.

The scene that hits me deepest, though, is the one in which George—who also teaches piano—criticizes a young pupil on her playing of a Chopin piece. “Always, always you must focus on the instrument you're playing,” he says, then insisting “Follow the rhythm, follow the rhythm,” as he snaps out metronome beats. Fervor is nothing without a framework, yet in this moment it's not the girl who's off-tempo, but George himself. When she replays the piece it sounds, to the ear, almost exactly the same. But now George is in a different place, and the music transports him. Then more layers come in: In voiceover we hear him reading a heartfelt letter that he composed to the pupils and parents of the school he was fired from—an impassioned plea for transparency, honesty and open dialogue. Ira intercuts doc-like images of the students going about a normal day, with one crucial absence: During choir practice, a new teacher is at the lectern, and there's little sense that George is missed. No person is being intentionally cruel; the only unkindness here is that life has gone on.

That is, perhaps, the ultimate indignity and the ultimate gift—life, always in motion. I hesitate to say where *Love Is Strange* goes from here except to note that it beautifully

captures that sense of inexorable flow in all its heartache and hope. There's an especially moving exchange between Joey and George near the end of the film about an unfinished portrait. Pointing to a blank section of the canvas the teen says of the painter, "You can imagine what he'd do with the colors." A simple truth about those people (and works of art) we love: It's the incompleteness that inspires.

Share this:



Related Posts

Introducing: The Single Take

We're happy to announce that, beginning this Saturday, October 18th, we'll be publishing a weekly...

The Single Take

Citizenfour and Nightcrawler The most startling thing about Laura Poitras's Citizenfour (opened Friday, October 24th), a documentary that...

The Single Take

BoJack Horseman and Whiplash The Black Stallion. Dark Horse. You Mustang Be Joking. Any of...

← PREVIOUS POST

Wicked Women Part Two: The Allure of Empowerment

NEXT POST →

The Single Take

PROUDLY POWERED BY WORDPRESS
THEME: EDITOR BY ARRAY