

Michael Mirasol, "A Great Love Story: 'Brokeback Mountain,'" *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 1, 2011

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What's the last great love story you've seen on film? I don't mean your typical "rom-coms" with contrived meet-cutes that rely heavily on celebrity star power. I'm talking about a genuine romance between two richly defined characters. If your mind draws a blank, you're not alone. Hollywood, along with much of the filmmaking world, seems to have either forgotten how to portray love affairs in ways that once made us swoon. Whatever the reason, be it due to our changing times or priorities, we might not see any significant ones for some time.

If there is any love story of this kind worth revisiting, it is Ang Lee's BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN, which just might be the most moving tale of star-crossed lovers for the past decade.

Not many people will remember the film this way, as its two lovers were hardly the kind seen before in major movie romances. Indeed, a story of two cowboys discovering a deep love for each other was bound to cause controversy. Who would dare take on such a subject? Were its motives exploitative? Political? A gimmick? Add in Ang Lee, the celebrated Taiwanese-born director known for ushering the new age of Sino-Cinema to Hollywood, and expectations could not possibly grow further.

But grow they did. Once the film won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, a prestige not taken lightly in film circles, interest surged. Countless raves and recognitions seem to follow, which should have been reassuring to the thoughtful moviegoer. But to many who still hadn't seen it, one could only wonder: Could a gay cowboy movie really be that good?

I remember seeing it for the first time in the UK, its audience awash in expectation. The crowd wasn't crackling with energy, but a feeling of hopeful delight was abundant, with smiles all around. I recall a trio of fellows in front of me good-naturedly ribbing each other once the lights went out.

As the film started, the tension was palpable. From all the press the movie garnered, people were dead silent. Once the two characters had their first moment of eye contact, though devoid of any real meaning, I could hear the slightest gasps among ladies in the audience. It's as if people were actively looking for that wanton look. But really for the first 30 minutes or so, it never came.

And that's what first impressed me. We don't catch them catching glances or meandering in awkward or clichéd moments of artificiality. We witness the intense rigors of ranching, braving storms, snow, and sheep. We experience the gorgeous but treacherous backdrop, which they toil with and against. We see them do their work and do it very well. Whether Ang Lee knew his subject was provocative or not, he soothes us into it. That's when I realized I didn't care so much whether they were attracted to each other. I cared about THEM.

And why do we care? Because of Ang Lee's clear commitment to strip his film's characters and story of any affectations. Of all his films, this is the one where his protagonists and events are laid bare. And due to the absence of any theatrics or stylistic gesturing, the film is able to retain a strong sense of authenticity, of deeply rooted human connection. Nothing here is pointed out or glossed over. The miracle and tragedy of Jack and Ennis' circumstance speak volumes.

Much has been made of how uncomfortable the film has made certain audiences, particularly heterosexual males, and that is understandable. But if it is any solace, the physical intimacy displayed here, like the movie itself, is never gratuitous. Their first night together plays out in a way most men might feel after a night when there's been too much to drink, and too much time without a woman. A mistake.

But their second tryst is a revelation, both to them and to us. Any mistake brings shame, and yet they both show an unmistakable longing for each other. If that moment was an eye-opener, their re-uniting after several years of being apart brings an undeniable sense of release. Reader, I was happy beyond belief when they were once again in each other's arms.

How did Ang Lee pull it off? For one thing, he was able to cast two of the most remarkable young actors at the time, known for their excellent work, and relatively untouched by the baggage of fame. With Jake Gyllenhaal and the late Heath Ledger, they helped create the two most memorable star-crossed lovers of all time.

We all know how Heath Ledger's role as Ennis Del Mar secured him a place in the pantheon of great screen performances, one so unique it caused Daniel Day-Lewis to honor it as "perfect." Here, he is a clenched fist, so coiled-up that words struggle to leave his lips. It is his damaged past, the "ghost in the room" as Roger Ebert described it, which damages any chance of living happily with his love. But he conveys with equal clarity, a fragile tenderness.

But we shouldn't overlook Jake Gyllenhaal as Jack Twist, the stronger of the two. It is he who is willing to sacrifice more for their happiness, imparting a sensitivity and forgiveness that any partner would want in a soul mate. His suffering may not be as deep as Ennis's, but it's just as painful.

Another factor that gives the film its beauty is its stunning scenery. Spanish cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto gives us the clearest and widest blue skies one could ever want and a glorious mountainous backdrop of flora and fauna that National Geographic would die for. There are vistas of sheep moving along the mountainside, looking like the lifeblood of nature's veins. Brokeback Mountain comes to symbolize love itself: A refuge from reality's cruelty.

Pair this imagery with Gustavo Santaolalla's guitar score, and you have the makings of an emotional reservoir. His twangs are spare, but with the movie, they are nothing short of sublime. You can almost listen to his notes echo through the mountainside. I didn't realize how affected I was until the day after. I purchased the soundtrack, and in the shower while listening to "The Wings," remembering Jack and Ennis, I wept.

Truth be told, Ang Lee is no stranger to stories of the heart. When you think about it, he's made them before. "Sense and Sensibility" and "Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon" contain heartbreaking moments of love realized and unrequited. Try to listen to Li Mu Bai's final words to Yu Shi Lien and not be moved to tears.

If there is any common theme running through his films, it is a patience and willingness to understand characters struggling with their contextual norms. He weaves careful and affectionate portraits of misunderstood people, dealing with what is expected of them. Once asked in an interview whether a gay director would have been better suited to direct the film he replied, "I don't think it's important that you're gay. I think it's important that you're sensitive." That he has always been.

There will always be people who will no doubt criticize "Brokeback Mountain" as having a homosexual agenda, forever labeling it "the gay cowboy movie." But they're missing the point. It cares much less about promoting gay rights than about telling the sad tale of two people who have discovered each other, that they're not alone, and that they can't live without each other. They just happen to be men. If that isn't star-crossed, I don't know what is.

Though the film isn't a weepy, its final scene packs an emotional wallop that sums up how tragic it all ended. A dresser with two shirts: one Ennis's, the other Jack's; one embracing the other. A picture of the mountain: their haven and prison. No mountain out the window. A closet closed.

It gets me every time.