First Love, Last Rites, directed by Jesse Peretz, from a short story by Ian McEwan

A refreshing change from Hollywood's image of youth

Richard Phillips
2 July 1998

First Love, Last Rites, the first feature by New York director and former member of the Lemon Heads rock band, Jesse Peretz, is a sensuous, humorous and pleasantly understated story of the progress of a first-love relationship between two college-age youth.

The lovers, Sissel (Natasha Gregson Wagner) and Joey (Giovanni Ribisi) live together in a one-room shack in a fishing village in Louisiana's bayou country. While social life is virtually non-existent and job prospects equally bleak, the two adolescents are passionately in love and, at first, unfazed by their limited future in the small town.

Joey, originally from New York is utterly absorbed by Sissel and appears prepared to break all his connections with the life he led in the city. Sissel, determined to distance herself from her separated parents, is equally enraptured by Joey. He offers an alternative to the mind-numbing atmosphere in the town.

Their passion however begins to falter under the pressure of constant demands for attention by Sissel's younger brother Adrian, the bickering between Sissel's separated parents and the cloying and introverted atmosphere in the socially depressed town.

At night, the couple are frequently disturbed by a rat scratching inside the walls of the one-room shack. This unsettling sound comes to symbolise the tensions developing in their relationship.

Reluctant for Joey to meet her estranged parents, Sissel finally introduces him to Harry, her father. A Vietnam veteran, he persuades Joey to join him in what he claims will be a major money-making venture -- eel fishing in the bayous. Harry's get-rich-quick scheme, one of many, is doomed to fail.

Sissel, impatient with her father's interference and Joey's naivete, begins to realise that the couple cannot maintain their blissful existence forever. She decides to take a job in a local cane crushing plant.

With their sexual curiosity satisfied and passions spent, the lovemaking gradually gives way to disillusionment, boredom, insecurity and then irritation with each other. The relationship, like Harry's hapless business scheme, falls apart.

Subtle and convincing performances from its principal players, Giovanni Ribisi, who starred in Richard Linklater's *Suburbia*, and Natasha Gregson Wagner, ensure *First Love, Last Rites* is a credible film.

Peretz, who neither glorifies nor patronises the youth, skillfully and with compassion captures their hopes, aspirations and confusions. The Joey and Sissel characters represent a refreshing break from the larger-than-life characters manufactured by Hollywood or the cold-blooded, street-wise youth created by numerous politically correct directors.

Much more, of course, can and should be said about the enormous difficulties facing young people today. Poverty, unemployment, drug addiction and a whole range of other social problems guarantee that few enjoy the languid moments shared by this young couple in the Louisiana bayous. Although one hopes Peretz will turn his attention to more complex and substantive themes in the future, the film nevertheless remains a sympathetic and at times beautiful depiction of some of the emotional obstacles encountered in the passage

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from adolescence to adulthood.

See Also:

An interview with Jesse Peretz, director of *First Love, Last Rites*

[2 July 1998]

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