

500 Days of Summer: The eternally sunlit paradise that is Los Angeles

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Directed by Marc Webb, written by Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber

In *500 Days of Summer*, Tom Hansen (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) is a successful employee at New Hampshire Greeting Cards, a Los Angeles-based Hallmark proxy. A prominent graphic designer with dreams of becoming an architect, Hansen befriends Summer Finn (Zooey Deschanel), a new employee, who tells Tom on their first company outing, “I don’t feel comfortable being anyone’s girlfriend” and “There’s no such thing as love.” Of course, Hansen falls head over heels for the elusive lady, and the film goes back and forth in time highlighting the 500 days of their courtship with equal doses of humor and heartbreak.

The movie is being sold to the 18-30 demographic as an anti-romantic comedy that is “not a love story,” and the claim is not entirely disingenuous. *500 Days* attempts to portray the failure to connect between an emotionally unavailable woman and the in love-with-love suitor who doesn’t want to forget her. What it does not discuss are the material realities and complexities that play a hand in determining the fate of contemporary relationships. It’s an omission that comes at too high a price for a film that prides itself on being emblematic of “modern love.”

Director Marc Webb’s previous effort was a concert video for the teen pop sensation Jesse McCartney, so *500 Days* is a first feature for him. The writing team of Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber are both credited with the upcoming *Pink Panther* sequel. All this provides a few clues as to where the material is heading.

Webb says, “Love is a seasonal thing, and these characters are subject to that.” They are not subject to

much else here. With the characters’ matching sprawling apartments and interior decorating tastes, the film seems to ask, what could possibly go wrong? A shocking moment of authenticity comes when the two frolic and play house at an IKEA store. In its naïveté, the mock shopping spree scene is the clearest attempt at placing the characters within a larger setting. But it is not enough.

The Los Angeles of *500 Days* is an eternally sunlit corporate paradise of beautiful apartments and chic bars just waiting to be constructed. In one scene, Hansen draws his architectural vision of the city: more skyscrapers, neatly arranged next to one another.

Actor Joseph Gordon Levitt, a Los Angeles native, talks about how most films that take place in the city depict it as all “plastic and silicone.” Director Webb concludes, “There’s something romantic about it, and hopefully it came to fruition in the locations we chose.” But I’m not sure which Los Angeles they are talking about.

The vast numbers of Mexican, Korean, and Filipino workers, not to mention the tens of thousands of unemployed and homeless who also reside in the city, are invisible. Would their inclusion have made the film more or less authentic? Some will argue that subjects or images of that nature have no place in a romantic comedy—“That’s not what the film is about, it’s about two people and their relationship.” But a film that attempts to discuss a human relationship without seriously considering the various elements inevitably involved in one, as well as the context in which it takes place, is lazy, and cynical.

Zooey Deschanel’s performance as the glossy-eyed ice princess is honest, and terrifying in its calculating precision. She cleverly allows the character to dip occasionally into a casual warmth, just enough to

survive, and it is unsettling to watch her pull out of it. But there's no attempt to honor her performance with a searching look at why this character might be so detached from her environment. A reference to a vague, clichéd history of divorced parents is thrown out there. The reality of the city the characters inhabit, so ripe with potential, is used as scenery where it should be used as evidence.

When we finally discover the real reason Summer is so elusive, we are left cold. The filmmakers have taken the easy way out. In the film's final coda, our voice-over narrator tells us that life, relationships, and love are "all about coincidence." Tom Hansen goes on to meet another potential girl of his dreams, by accident. Her name is Autumn. We can expect more of the same.



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