

La La Land and *Jackie*: More American success stories

Joanne Laurier
22 December 2016

La La Land, written and directed by Damien Chazelle, score composed and orchestrated by Justin Hurwitz, lyrics by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul; *Jackie*, directed by Pablo Larraín, screenplay by Noah Oppenheim

La La Land

Damien Chazelle's *La La Land* is an odd, decidedly unsatisfying film. Some of its features are simply irritating, a few are charming, and there may even be a genuinely unsettling element. Whether the latter is intended by the filmmaker is not entirely clear.

First of all, the title of this romantic musical is more appropriate than Chazelle (*Whiplash*) and company perhaps intend. Taken at face value, *La La Land* celebrates Los Angeles as a perpetually sunny place that can turn dreams into gold. The 31-year-old director has created a fantasy centered on two aspiring artists who come together in a city where, according to the movie's production notes, "the famous and aspirational collide."

The film opens with a song-and-dance number on an LA freeway where clogged traffic generates a production overstuffed with dance and acrobatics. On the highway, when the energetic, colorful gyrations subside, Sebastian, or Seb (Ryan Gosling), meets Mia (Emma Stone) in a brief, cantankerous encounter. They will run into each other again at a club whose manager (J.K. Simmons) has just fired Seb, his pianist, for playing "free jazz" and not Christmas jingles (the various seasons are announced in large intertitles—part of the joke is that the weather is always the same).

Mia, a struggling actress, connects with the musician, a fierce jazz purist, who laments that classical jazz is falling out of favor ("... but not on my watch!"). Seb dreams of opening his own club, to be known as "Chicken on a Stick," as an homage to Charlie Parker, nicknamed "Bird" due to his love of the fowl.

Mia too has high hopes. Her bedroom wall is plastered with a gigantic image of Ingrid Bergman, as well as, strangely enough, posters for Edgar G. Ulmer's *Black Cat* and Ralph Nelson's rather conventional *Lilies of the Field*. Seb and Mia's serious mutual courtship commences at a screening of Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* at the Rialto in Pasadena, and proceeds to the next level with a visit to the Griffith Observatory (where a pivotal scene in Ray's film takes place). There the couple goes airborne and waltzes through an artificial, imaginary galaxy.

Seb catches a break when his friend Keith (R&B star John Legend)

offers him a lucrative gig with a band that performs a type of jazz/rock fusion. Despite his artistic misgivings, Seb's stack of unpaid bills forces the issue and, from there, he's apparently on a beeline to a dazzling career.

Concurrently, Mia, sick of humiliating auditions, writes her own one-woman show. The viewer is never privy to its content, but Mia ultimately sees the theater piece as yet another failure and heads home to her family in small-town Nevada. By this time, Seb and Mia are having problems, but he nonetheless delivers the news to her family home that producers back in Los Angeles want to create an acting vehicle for her in Paris. Will triumphs in their respective fields strengthen or tear their relationship apart?

La La Land, one has to say, is not graced with consistently sharp-witted dialogue, a cohesive narrative, or an especially intriguing score. On the other hand, Stone and Gosling are fine and appealing, despite the fact that their forte is neither singing nor dancing. There are moments that suggest that if Chazelle had kept things casual and unpretentious, with his performers scuffling along, slightly off-key, all might have been (more or less) well.

Unfortunately, the film is not content to be a trifle, it has certain aspirations of its own and they are not all to the filmmakers' credit. *La La Land*'s biggest failing is its complacency. A rising stock market and the continued profitability of various, largely parasitic entertainment industry enterprises, along with the flourishing of certain budding careers, have had an impact on this particular, susceptible Hollywood crowd.

The production notes credit this empty-headed comment to producer Marc Platt: "*La La Land* is absolutely a love letter to the city. The way the film mixes two people leading very hip, modern lives with all these iconic Hollywood locales is unique. You get a feeling both of the romantic fantasy of the city and its grounding in real lives."

Aside from the fact that whether the film is grounded in "real lives" is exceedingly debatable, the city's "romantic fantasy" applies more and more to a select few. Los Angeles has some of the worst poverty in the US. According to one recent survey, "almost 40% of our community lives in what only can be called misery. The poverty rate in Los Angeles is higher than any other major American city. Median income in Los Angeles is lower than it was in 2007." (LA 2020 Commission's Report)

In addition, the notion that Los Angeles (or New York or any other major metropolis) is the center of the universe and everyone else in the country lives in semi-barbarism is foolish and philistine. The snobbish comments in *La La Land* about Boise, Idaho, for example, are objectionable.

There are moments in *La La Land* that contain criticisms, or hints of

criticism, of the commercial film world. The unpleasant side of things shows up principally in the form of Mia's painful auditions for various television "procedurals" and other banal projects. The scenes show a talented actress at the mercy of callous, inattentive mediocrities who make or break careers and spirits.

Unhappily, however, Mia's character simply doesn't add up. It clearly hasn't been thought through. Her disheartening audition experiences and job as an exploited barista working in a café on the Warner Bros. lot, combined with her liveliness and obvious intelligence, don't jibe with *La La Land*'s representation of her as someone who uncritically adores the whole film industry machinery. One might also mention Mia's sensitive, introspective solo ("Here's to the hearts that ache, / Here's to the mess we make"), which seems out of keeping with her apparent seamless adaptation to fame and fortune. In the end, she's less a person than a "rags to riches" (or "unknown to celebrity") device, whose initial difficulties take on meaning only in the light of her eventual triumph.

Chazelle claims to be inspired by the films of Jacques Demy, the French New Wave director famous for 1960s' musicals such as *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*. Whatever one may think of Demy, his work is informed by a consistent and integral vision. Chazelle at this point is afflicted with a damaging eclecticism. The first half or two-thirds of *La La Land* in particular consists of sequences nearly each one of which seems organized to create a distinct, individual impression. The hurried miscellaneousness and scatter-shot quality of it all wear thin.

This has an impact on how one responds to the love relationship at the center of the film. The director doesn't really seem to take the couple's condition seriously until it encounters perhaps fatal obstacles. Frankly, his attention lies elsewhere, one feels, trying to impress the viewer. By that time, it is too late to be taken too much to heart.

Is Chazelle's attitude toward stardom and affluence as conventional as it seems on the surface? Perhaps. Giving him the benefit of the doubt, however, certain of the last sequences at least suggest the possibility that there might be something life-damaging and even tragic about "success."

In any case, far more inappropriate than the director's references to Demy is the praise heaped on the movie by a host of film critics, who liken *La La Land* to various iconic pieces, such as Stanley Donen's *Singin' in the Rain* (this is the film mentioned most often), George Cukor's *A Star is Born* and Vincente Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis*. Even cinematic giant Orson Welles is mentioned in the same breath as Chazelle. This simply indicates that the critics, by and large, don't know anything.

There is unquestionable talent on hand in *La La Land*, although it mostly exists in embryonic and undeveloped form. While audiences are perhaps responding to the fact that the luscious color in Chazelle's film is attractive and there is not the usual bombast and gratuitous violence, the movie's own line, "That's L.A.—they worship everything and value nothing," comes too close to summing up the director's approach to his work.

Jackie

Chilean filmmaker Pablo Larraín's *Jackie* is an attempt at a biographical portrait of Jacqueline Kennedy, dealing with certain

aspects of her life in the immediate aftermath of the November 1963 assassination of her husband, President John F. Kennedy. The movie revolves around an interview Jackie (Natalie Portman) grants to a journalist (a remarkable Billy Crudup, based on the writer Theodore H. White) at the Kennedy compound in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts following the assassination.

Scripted by Noah Oppenheim, a former executive at NBC News, *Jackie* makes much of Mrs. Kennedy's 1961 televised tour of the newly re-decorated White House; her Air Force One flight with Kennedy's coffin in her blood-soaked pink suit, adamant that "I want them to see what they've done"; her relationship with Robert Kennedy (Peter Sarsgaard); and the various issues involved in staging the funeral cortège.

The film also includes a clip of Lee Harvey Oswald, Kennedy's assassin, the "silly little communist" (in Jackie Kennedy's words—an error, of course) and another of Jack Ruby shooting Oswald, as well as a view of the Lincoln bedroom with the framed Gettysburg Address.

Besides creating a work that is trite, superficial and cold (Mica Levi's discordant, chilly score adds to the overall effect), Larraín unnecessarily throws in the element of religion. John Hurt is "the priest" who has lines such as "There comes a time in man's search for meaning when one realizes that there are no answers."

There was no reason to expect that anything insightful or outstandingly truthful would emerge from a script by Oppenheim. His record encompasses stints as senior producer of NBC's *Today Show*, executive producer of *Scarborough Country* and senior producer of *Hardball with Chris Matthews*. He also co-created CNBC's *Mad Money with Jim Cramer*. Furthermore, during his time with NBC News, he led coverage of the 9/11 events and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Oppenheim has shifted from organizing and manipulating present-day news events to organizing and manipulating historical events.

Larraín's movie liberally employs the oft-used analogy between the Kennedy White House and King Arthur's legendary court of Camelot. The punch-line is: "There will never be another Camelot," hoarsely intoned by Portman's Jackie. It is a phrase the filmmakers feel no reason and make no effort to explain.

As the WSWS wrote on the occasion of fifty years since the assassination of the 35th US president: "The assassination of President Kennedy marked a critical inflection point in the modern history of the United States ... John F. Kennedy was the last president who was able to link his administration, in the public mind, with the democratic traditions of the United States ... Kennedy enthusiasts, especially after the president's death, referred to his administration as 'Camelot.' It could be better described as 'a bright and shining lie.'"

Needless to say, the film has no clue about any of these issues.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact