

Final Portrait: Geoffrey Rush stars in affectionate film about Giacometti

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Written and directed by Stanley Tucci; based on A Giacometti Portrait (1965) by James Lord

“Art interests me very much but truth interests me infinitely more. The more I work, the more I see things differently, that is, everything gains in grandeur every day, becomes more and more unknown, more and more beautiful ... All that I ask is to press on wildly” – Alberto Giacometti

Final Portrait, starring Geoffrey Rush as the enigmatic Swiss-Italian sculptor and painter Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966), premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in 2017. More than a year later, it is finally screening in selected US and Canadian cinemas.

Written and directed by Stanley Tucci (*Big Night*, *The Impostors*, *Joe Gould’s Secret* and *Blind Date*), the 90-minute feature is a modest but worthy homage to both Giacometti and the creative process, and a tour de force for Rush, who is currently suing the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* for defamation over unsubstantiated “inappropriate behaviour” allegations.

Tucci’s film covers a three-week period in 1964, two years before Giacometti’s death, and deals with just one painting—a portrait of James Lord (Armie Hammer), a young American writer and participant in the post-war Parisian art scene. Based on Lord’s short 1965 book about the painting, most of the film is set in Giacometti’s dilapidated and chaotic studio-home at 46 Rue Hippolyte-Maindron in Paris.

Lord, who had befriended Giacometti in the 1950s, is asked to sit for the artist: “No longer than two to three hours, an afternoon at most,” he is told.

The portrait, after 18 sittings, numerous over-painted or destroyed canvasses and many costly re-schedulings of Lord’s return flight to New York, is eventually finished, but not necessarily to Giacometti’s satisfaction.

Between sittings, Lord accompanies Giacometti to local restaurants and cafes and gets to know Diego (Tony

Shalhoub), his stoic, artist brother, Annette (Sylvie Testud), Giacometti’s long-suffering wife, and the prostitute Caroline (Clemence Poesy), the artist’s flighty mistress and muse.

Giacometti was born in 1901 in Switzerland to an artistic family, and was an intensely sensitive and complicated man. His life spanned immense social and political convulsions—two world wars, the Russian Revolution, the depression, the rise of fascism across Europe, the betrayals of Stalinism, and the disoriented intellectual climate produced by the post-war boom. These events impacted on him in complex ways.

A precocious artist from an early age, Giacometti studied sculpture at the Geneva College of the Arts. In his late teens, he visited Italy several times, where he saw, and was influenced by, Tintoretto, Giotto and Cimabue.

In 1922, he moved to France, attending the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Montparnasse and studying under sculptor Antoine Bourdelle, a close associate of Auguste Rodin. Moving away from Bourdelle’s classical realist approach, the young artist was attracted to the revolutionary Surrealist art movement. He rejected working from human models, and during 1929–32 produced a number of exceptional and critically acclaimed sculptures.

By 1934, however, Giacometti had become increasingly dissatisfied with his work and fell out with the Surrealists, after he decided to return to life models. From then on, and for the rest of his life, he concentrated primarily on sculptures and paintings of the human figure, obsessively changing and revising each work. During the Nazi occupation of France, he fled from Paris, returning in 1945. His first public exhibition, after more than a decade, took place in New York City in 1948.

In a 1958 review of Giacometti’s drawings, Lord wrote: “However fashionable the art of Giacometti may now have become, it owes nothing to fashion. His creative

effort is an obsessive attempt to resolve the classic problems of representation.

“Each of his drawings exists autonomously, obeying its own rigorous laws of relativity and bound up in the sensation of space which is as essential to Giacometti as it was to Cézanne. No wilful mannerism or calligraphic caprice, no sentimentality, self-indulgence or pastiche is permitted to inhibit a sincere or explicit representation. The figures and objects are seen by the artist not as pretexts, but as ends in themselves and are to be seen similarly by us.”

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, existentialists declared that Giacometti’s gaunt and elongated sculptures and sparse portraits were the artistic embodiment of their pessimistic, dead-end philosophy— i.e., an expression of humanity’s “social alienation,” “psychological angst,” and the “absurdity” of contemporary life.

However, the artist himself, whose extraordinary and often unsettling work won him worldwide fame during this time, never publicly embraced existentialism and its demoralised outlook, which dominated intellectual circles during the early post-war years. He was totally indifferent to “public opinion” and financial and artistic “success.”

As Lord explained in his extensive 1985 book, *Giacometti, a biography*: “Every artist, even the most mediocre, works hard. But the hardest work is that to which the entire purpose and meaning of an individual’s life is committed. Such was the case with Alberto, and it didn’t make living with him easy, because art came first and everything else was, if not irrelevant, very secondary.”

Final Portrait does not attempt to provide a detailed overview of Giacometti’s life and work, and the multiplicity of factors under pinning it. But the film perfectly captures his world and his aesthetic dilemmas. Director of photography Danny Cohen gives the movie a grey-brown desaturated look, in keeping with Giacometti’s studio.

Director Tucci has a keen ear for dialogue and a good sense of comedic timing, and Rush excels. The award-winning actor effortlessly provides flesh and blood to the artist’s frustrations, self-doubt, anger, generosity, idiosyncratic opinions, unsettling fantasies and difficult personal behaviour.

Giacometti ruminates about the dilemmas confronting 20th century artists and denounces Picasso and Chagall. His teasing of the handsome and impeccably dressed Lord during sittings is a delight—“Front-on, you look like a brute. Side-on, you look like a degenerate.” Responding

to Lord’s attempts to overcome Giacometti’s incessant self-doubt, the chain-smoking artist drolly responds, “There’s no greater breeding ground for doubt than success.”

Final Portrait has generally received favourable reviews, but there have been one or two sour notes. Last September, an Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio journalist tut-tutted that Giacometti was a “really flawed” individual and suggested that the film’s portrayal of the artist’s humanity let him off the hook for his “less than perfect personal life.”

A *TorontoNow* review, entitled “Giacometti biopic *Final Portrait* arrives at just the wrong time,” by Susan G. Cole, echoed this sentiment, declaring: “[A]t a time when there’s been an increasing demand for women’s stories, it’s hard to care about an ageing male creator who treats everyone around him as if he’s the only person on the planet.... Really guys. In 2018 we don’t need this. Time to move on—or out of the way.”

Whether *Final Portrait*’s delayed release in North America had anything to do with the vicious #MeToo-style allegations, hurled against Rush last year by the Murdoch media, is not clear. Whatever the reason, US and Canadian audiences can now watch Rush’s dazzling performance.

The movie also provides an opportunity to ponder the dangers and political consequences posed by the gender politics witch-hunters and their media accomplices, who demand the “right” to destroy the career of this talented actor, and others of his calibre, on the basis of completely unproven allegations.

If the #MeToo vigilantes have their way, one can expect that Alberto Giacometti will be denounced and scandalised over the details of his personal life, and his extraordinary work removed forever from public view.



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