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'La La Land' revives a musical film genre

Los Angeles is sexy. But it's not romantic. At least not by day.

By night, however, Los Angeles is a dreamscape of twinkling lights that director Damien Chazelle ("Whiplash") uses in "La La Land," his second film tribute to music and musicians, to ride into the recesses of our nostalgic consciousness.

Chazelle charmingly recasts a bittersweet modern romance in the magical mold of the old movie musicals, dancing us out of the harsh desert sun into a fantasy world of saturated color where dreams really do come true — though not without a twist.

As in all sleights of hand, Chazelle accomplishes this effect through misdirection. He repaints the City of Stars as the City of Light by packing his film with unrelenting visual, musical and cinematic references to Paris. He sends the star-crossed lovers, Sebastian and Mia, through Hollywood sets that are the backdrops for classics like "Casablanca," and the very fact of the movie's musical form sets off fireworks of romantic associations.

All of this visual magic is superimposed on the hardly extraordinary story of a difficult courtship between Sebastian, an uncompromising, self-centered jazz pianist, and Mia, a struggling actress and playwright who works in the coffee shop on the Warner Bros. backlot.



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Although they don't exactly meet in a cute way, they do meet in sassy ways, over and over again — she flips him the bird in traffic, he roughly grazes her aside in a nightclub, he douses her audition blouse with coffee — before they finally launch as romantic partners.

The tart pleasure of "La La Land" echoes that of the musical "The Fantasticks" in its acknowledgement of sadness and lost opportunity as part of life.

Chazelle's sensibilities as a musician are channeled through Sebastian who, as a jazz fetishist, is dedicated to preserving the art form. Sebastian's friend and bandleader Keith (John Legend) challenges him to be more flexible:

Jazz is a revolutionary art form. How can you be revolutionary if you aren't willing to change?

"La La Land" has received accolades in this year of "Hamilton" as part of the wave reviving musicals as a genre. The form had fallen out of favor as unnatural storytelling — what justification could there be for a character to suddenly burst into song?

Chazelle answers this question to everyone's satisfaction. He uses song the way other directors use voiceover, as a device to permit characters to express their internal narratives. The effect is delightful, and the big opening number, "Another Day of Sun," in which gridlocked motorists break into song and dance in the middle of the highway, won't seem too farfetched to anyone who has attempted to navigate Lake Shore Drive on a festival night.

The tart pleasure of "La La Land" echoes that of the musical "The Fantasticks" in its acknowledgement of sadness and lost opportunity as part of life. Even when daylight and experience burn away dreams and illusion, wistfulness survives.

Mia and Sebastian second-guess and doubt themselves. They exasperate and inspire each other until their dreams finally do come true. And yet the refrain of second-guessing and doubt lingers, like the strains of a melody that just won't leave your head.