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In Limbo, and in Love

'If I Stay' Weighs Teenager's Prospects After Horrific Crash

By A. O. SCOTT AUG. 21, 2014

This summer has been bookended by two movies, both based on young adult best sellers and starring gifted and ambitious actresses, about smart, independent-minded teenage girls finding love in the shadow of death. It is hard to avoid comparing “If I Stay,” which opens on Friday, with “The Fault in Our Stars,” but there is also no reason to choose between them. Each one is a cleanly directed, credibly acted machine for the production of tears.

Movie-induced tears, though they may be involuntary, are not necessarily simple and are always worth subjecting to chemical analysis. “If I Stay,” based on a novel by Gayle Forman, hits the audience with a series of tragedies that ripple out from a single horrific event — a car accident on a snowy Oregon road — and it delivers each piece of bad news with carefully considered, maximally sadistic timing.

The grief and sorrow are punctuated, and to some extent made bearable, by jabs of warmth and humor arising from family affection and adolescent romance. The director, R. J. Cutler, whose previous work has mostly been in big- and small-screen documentaries, has a way of underplaying large feelings and amplifying subtle shifts of mood. The film, based on a well-shaped screenplay by Shauna Cross, moves in waves and surges of emotion. Everyday experiences of longing, regret, contentment and hope are given special melodramatic intensity because they are played

out on the edge of the grave.

This is morbid, but also effective. The narrator and protagonist is Mia (Chloë Grace Moretz), who for much of the movie hovers in limbo between life and death, her spiritual self wandering barefoot and invisible through the halls of the hospital where her body lies in a coma. The conceit, put into words by a helpful nurse (Aisha Hinds) and implicit in the film's title, is that it is up to Mia to decide whether to let herself die or keep on living. The long flashbacks that alternate with her bedside vigil can be seen as attempts to balance the ledger of her short time on earth. Has it been enough? What and whom would she leave behind? What would she have to live for?

The second question has two answers, which are sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory: Adam and the cello. Adam (Jamie Blackley), a year ahead of her in high school when they meet, is a rock 'n' roll dreamboat, an archetypal bad boy who isn't really bad at all. He is smitten with Mia when he sees her playing in a school practice room, and her passionate devotion to the instrument awakens his interest. It also eventually threatens to pull them apart, as her ambition leads her to apply to Juilliard. Even though his band takes him out on the road for weeks at a time, he is committed to staying local and wants her to do the same.

The music is both the best and the corniest part of "If I Stay," which makes excellent use of the classical cello repertoire, beyond just the Bach suite that has become one of the most overplayed pieces in modern cinema. Zoltan Kodaly's haunting and romantic Sonata in B minor is an important touchstone in Adam and Mia's relationship. Mia's Juilliard audition piece is Camille Saint-Saëns's dazzling Cello Concerto in A minor (with piano accompaniment), and she attacks it with a fervor that takes even her by surprise.

It may be that Ms. Moretz captures Mia's seriousness about her art — and her joy in it — so credibly because it reflects her own. At 17 and already a decade into her career, this remarkable actress is still exploring the far reaches of her range, and it's always exciting to watch her test

herself. Playing a more or less ordinary teenager facing more or less typical pressures is not easy, and to the extent that "If I Stay" is genuinely interesting as well as weep-worthy, it is largely because of her.

The other actors struggle to stay on the quirky side of generic. (The only exception is Stacy Keach, gruff and restrained in a few scenes as Mia's grandfather.) Mia's parents, Denny (Joshua Leonard) and Kat (Mireille Enos), are a couple of punk rockers turned cool neo-traditionalists, and they speak to each other and to their kids (Mia has a younger brother, played by Jakob Davies) with a peppy sarcasm that seems to have been learned from sitcoms. The divide between their musical tastes and their daughter's is perhaps a little overstated (though it is more of an issue in Ms. Forman's book), but they are such friendly people that it seems impolite to complain about them.

Adam is kind of the same way. Mr. Blackley is certainly gorgeous and can throw a sweet smile or a brooding pout at the camera when the mood strikes. Adam is the frontman for a band called Willamette Stone, whose music is sometimes described as punk rock but is really sincere and smooth power pop. He and Mia learn to appreciate each other's preferred music, even as she finds the rock 'n' roll lifestyle, and the female attention it brings to her boyfriend, to be a little irksome.

Her coma throws the love-work question, and the tensions within a two-career artistic couple, into pretty stark relief. The central dramatic problem in "If I Stay" is supposed to be Mia's decision whether to quit the world or stick with it, but it is really the world that faces the test. Will it — will Adam — love and appreciate her enough to make survival worth her while?

The power of this question comes not only from the dreadful circumstances in which it is made, but also from its authenticity as an expression of adolescent feeling. The achievement of "If I Stay," as of "The Fault in Our Stars" and other books of the same type, is that it attaches life-or-death stakes to a basic modern identity crisis. Whom to love, where to go to school, how to be nice to your parents and also be free of them —

these are the real, sometimes painful choices this movie is about, and the real, half-hidden sources of the tears it will inspire.

"If I Stay" is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). Carefully rationed swear words, sexual situations and scenes of underage drinking.

If I Stay

Opens on Friday

Directed by R. J. Cutler; written by Shauna Cross, based on the novel by Gayle Forman; director of photography, John de Borman; edited by Keith Henderson; music by Heitor Pereira; production design by Brent Thomas; costumes by Monique Prudhomme; produced by Alison Greenspan; released by Warner Bros. Pictures. Running time: 1 hour 46 minutes.

WITH: Chloë Grace Moretz (Mia Hall), Mireille Enos (Kat), Joshua Leonard (Denny), Jamie Blackley (Adam), Aisha Hinds (Nurse Ramirez), Jakob Davies (Teddy) and Stacy Keach (Gramps).

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