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AFI FEST 2020 CAPSULE REVIEW: Uncle Frank (Alan Ball, 2020)

Description

Posted and viewed by Larry Gleeson during AFI FEST 2020 presented by AUDI.

Uncle Frank, an Amazon Original Film, starring Paul Bettany, Sophia Lillis, Peter Macdissi, Steve Zahn, and Stephen Root (*Office Space*), and directed by Alan Ball, tells the story of a young, rural South Carolinian woman, Beth, (Sophia Lillis) a precocious spirit with a connection to her rarely seen Uncle Frank (Bettany).

Uncle Frank, Frank Bledsoe, portrayed by Paul Bettany, is a dashing figure seemingly dismissed at home and who lives and teaches Literature (18th Century Women Poets) at New York University (NYU). When it comes time for Beth to go to college, she receives a scholarship to attend NYU. While there she learns of her Uncle Frankâ??s worldly ways (heâ??s a sober pot smoker) including his relationship with a gay Saudi man, â??Wallyâ?• Walid.

When a death in the family occurs, Beth and Uncle Frank embark on a road trip back to South Carolina delving into deep interpersonal dialogue on sexuality and death before being unexpectedly joined by Wally. Along the rest of the way, Beth is exposed to bigotry, homophobia, and a warm, loving relationship. Once she and Uncle Frank are back in small-town, rural Creekville, South Carolina, the past reveals itself, and moments for self-reflection and overcoming imposed beliefs come to pass.

Uncle Frank, a character-driven drama, is quite entertaining and could easily pass for a period piece, much like *Green Book*, with its costuming by Megan Stark Evans, production design by Darcy C Scanlan, its superb cinematography by Khalid Mohtaseb, and with the layered narrative (screenwriting, Alan Ball) dealing with family, remorse, death, loss, same-sex relationships, religion, as well as social norms and beliefs in the Deep South.

But it was the cast, in my opinion, that brought the filmâ??s narrative and its characters to life allowing for the suspension of disbelief. Steve Zahn played Uncle Frankâ??s respectful and admiring younger brother convincingly. He accepts his older brotherâ??s way of life. Stephen Root delivers a powerful, domineering performance as the familyâ??s unequivocal patriarch with the staunchest of beliefs, Daddy Mac. Peter Macdissi delivers a warm, loving, and heartfelt performance as Uncle Frankâ??s partner,

â??Wallyâ?• Walid, a Saudi man risking everything to be in a relationship with Frank but not willing to give up everything when Frank drinks again. In addition, Macdissi provides excellent timing with comedic relief at several pivotal moments. Sophia Lillis shines as Beth in an understated performance ala in a Ryan Gosling way. Lillis delivers an emphatically as small-town, ridiculed, Beth who blossoms into a smart, intelligent, beautiful woman standing boldly in her truth. And, Paul Bettany brings a much-needed gravitas to the role of â??Uncle Frankâ?• Frank Bledsoe.

Seeing Bettany cast had a lot to do with my viewing selection of *Uncle Frank*. And, he doesnâ??t disappoint as he carries the heaviness, the emotional weight, of *Uncle Frank*. My hatâ??s off to Casting Director, Avy Kaufman *(Brokeback Mountain).* Bravo! *Uncle Frank* is scheduled for a U.S. release (internet) on November 25th, 2020, and is a beautiful, entertaining film. Very warmly recommended viewing!

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