



Sundance FILM REVIEW: *Sylvie's Love* • Was Not Enough

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Sylvie's Love, directed by Eugene Ash, starring Tessa Thompson, Nnamdi Asomugha, and featuring Eva Longoria, screened in the U.S. Dramatic Competition at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival. The Douglas Sirk-like melodramatic film opens with luscious non-diegetic jazz music as the audience is quickly introduced to the soulful sounds of Nancy Wilson. In a non-linear narrative technique, the audience is taken back with a text title five years prior to Harlem in the summer of 1957 at Mr. Jay's Records. Here the audience is introduced to Sylvie, portrayed by Tessa Thompson, working at her father's record store.

It walks Robert, portrayed by former All-Pro, National Football League defensive back Nnamdi Asomugha, looking for a supplemental income to his musical residency at the Blue Moroccan Lounge and the sparks fly as the two engage in playful banter over the latest Thelonious Monk album. Imagine Marissa Tomei in her Academy Award-winning role as Mona Lisa Vito talking shop in *My Cousin Vinny* because Sylvie has an expansive knowledge of jazz and some repressed feelings.

Robert, a saxophonist, entices Sylvie to come and see him perform with the Dickie Brewster Quartet. And, what a performance it is! Sylvie is smitten and due to emotions beyond her control engages with Robert in a summerlong romance along with her cousin Mona, portrayed by Aja Naomi King, and Dickie, portrayed by Tone Bell. Sylvie is waiting for her beau, a member of one of New York's finest families, to return home from his service in the war.

Naturally, Sylvie's mother disapproves of Sylvie and Robert together as she has spent her child-rearing days preparing her daughter for New York society through the Eunice Johnson School of Etiquette. Suddenly, the band lands an overseas touring engagement beginning in Paris. Yet, Sylvie's life has been cast. Nevertheless, her heart yearns for love as Robert has evoked unknown and unexperienced feelings deep inside.

In addition, with exquisite costuming from Phoenix Mellow and a timeless soundtrack from Fabrice Lecomte, the film emanates a very progressive vibe especially when the opportunity presents itself for

Sylvie to be a part of a television production team. Consequentially, Sylvie begins taking charge of her career when her lifelong dream is challenged when the remnants of an offputting comment, “Can you imagine a colored girl making TV shows!” rears its ugly head again.

Writer/director Eugene Ashe covers a lot of ground culturally in *Sylvie’s Love*. The sexual revolution impresses itself upon society. Motown becomes the musical epicenter. and, Sylvie settled into the unfulfilled role of the happy homemaker with her semi-pre-arranged marriage. Interestingly, in a fashion similar to Guillermo Del Toro with *Shape Of Water*, Ashe slips in telling props as cultural artifacts. For example, in one scene Sylvie is shown reading *The Feminine Mystique* similar to the scene where Michael Shannon’s character in *Shape of Water* is reading Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power Of Positive Thinking*. And, like Del Toro, Ashe weaves romance, jazz, and career choices into a sweet and enduring love story transcending time and place.

Moreover, Tessa Thompson turns in a brilliant performance as the unapologetic, self-confident Sylvie breaking down barriers as the woman who takes control of her life in unexpected but welcomed ways. For me, it doesn’t get any better than watching beautifully talented actors given strong writing performing in sophisticated, cinematic production designs. Add to that winning combination a top-notch, jazz-infused soundtrack and I’m off to the moon and back wanting more. Highly recommended film.

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