

'May December' tells a sordid story from an interesting point of view

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: <<<<

out of <<<<<<

Running Time: 117 minutes

This feature is currently in limited release at theaters and will be available to stream on Netflix everywhere Friday, Dec. 1.

In 1997, schoolteacher Mary Kay Letourneau found herself all over the news after taking part in a romantic relationship with a 12-year-old student. In fact, their continuing affair resulted in children. Her bizarre story has inspired *May December*, a drama with moments of dark comedy that deals with a very similar scenario. This unusual movie succeeds thanks to some great performances, in addition to the way it deals with aspects of such a relationship that might not initially come to mind.

The story is set in 2015 and follows actress Elizabeth Berry (Natalie Portman), who has been cast in the lead role of an independent film. She is playing the part of Gracie Atherton-Yoo, a married pet-shop employee who had an affair with the 13-year-old schoolmate of her son. After

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having children and divorcing to be with young husband Joe (Charles Melton), Gracie (Julianne Moore) invites the performer to their Savannah, Georgia home.

The intention is to show off their happy life to the actress. But the charismatic Elizabeth asks many questions and tries to discern who is in control within the relationship. She also probes for opinions from their children, as well as Gracie's ex and children from her previous family. As she continues, Elizabeth discovers secrets and even starts to manipulate the pair in order to form her own take on them.

Telling the story from the point-of-view of an actress trying to build a character for a film is an interesting and effective storytelling technique that pays dividends here. Both Gracie and Elizabeth are selfish in their pursuits, making for an interesting dynamic.

Obviously, Elizabeth's actions revolve around trying to accurately portray Gracie and earn raves for her own performance. She is willing to do anything to get the pair to trust her and open themselves up. And Gracie comes across as closed-off, showing only what she wants people to see. There's a palpable tension between the two women that's consistently fun to watch.

The movie does possess an unusual sense of humor that is initially jolting. There are sharp musical stings at odd moments, peppered in at the beginning of the film to sound like something out of an over-the-top melodrama. However, one does get used to the tactic and it does earn chuckles here and there. And Elizabeth's quest for truth does result in some darkly funny and awkward encounters between herself, interview subjects and extended family members.

Of course, as the story progresses things do get darker and take a dramatic turn. One unique element and performance that stands out is that of Melton as husband Joe. As he reveals more and more about his marriage, the performance subtly displays just how out-of-his-element he is as husband and father. Both physically and emotionally, he doesn't seem much older than his own kids who are growing up and are now about to leave the home.

This reviewer hadn't really considered finer points of this kind of relationship and the movie does an excellent job of examining the ensuing complications, not to mention Joe's lingering doubts about his future with Gracie.

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In the end, Elizabeth does manage to influence Joe enough to reveal exactly who was pulling the strings years ago when the two lovers crossed paths, even if the reveal is only for the benefit of the actress and her role in the film adaptation. But there's a lot to unpack in this movie and its aversion to making blunt statements about these individuals makes the story and performances intriguing and more revealing. *May December* may be about a subject considered sordid by many, but it provides a sharp and effective dissection of a real-life story.

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