

'Licorice Pizza' is a coming-of-age tale filled with odd encounters

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

out of <<<<<<

Running Time: 133 minutes

This title from Metro Goldwyn Mayer Pictures and Focus Features is now playing in select cinemas and opens everywhere on Christmas Day.

For movie enthusiasts, a new title from writer/director Paul Thomas Anderson is met with great anticipation. His early films like "Boogie Nights" and "Magnolia" earned plenty of accolades, detailing the trials and tribulations of several very eccentric characters. Anderson has also been responsible for powerful works like "There Will Be Blood," but in the last decade his output has been spottier. "The Master" and "Inherent Vice" were intriguing, but messy and frustrating experiences.

Even the recent and effective "Phantom Threat" felt like the work of a completely different person. Those feeling trepidation toward his latest effort, "Licorice Pizza," should be relieved to learn that it does feel like a Paul Thomas Anderson movie in tone. It isn't perfect, but more of the material here works than in recent efforts.

Set in 1973, this tale introduces viewers to fifteen-year-old child performer Gary Valentine (Cooper Hoffman), an actor beginning to realize that he has gotten too old for his onscreen

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persona. Still brimming with overconfidence, he awkwardly attempts to woo twenty-five-year-old Alana Kane (Alana Haim) after she arrives at his high school to assist a photographer on photo day. Of course, she immediately turns down his advances. However, unhappy with her own life, Alana can't help but be impressed with Gary's can-do attitude.

A relationship forms and she begins helping the teen with some of his projects, including a waterbed business. As they get themselves into all kinds of trouble, the two viciously fight over petty matters. Yet every time they part ways, the two somehow end up crossing paths again and again.

Coming-of-age pictures are a dime a dozen, but this particular effort does stand out in its attempts to throw completely unique elements into the story, as well as characters who are different from what one would expect to see. The odd connection between a young man and older woman adds a new and unexpected wrinkle to the central relationship, as does Gary's friendly, but somewhat self-involved young actor attitude. Their outrageous encounters with celebrities in the San Fernando Valley also result in plenty of surreal circumstances that separate the film from others of its ilk.

The movie also benefits greatly from its two leads, who are both making their feature film debuts. Hoffman and Haim have been costumed and made-up to look like real people and their strange jealous bickering and awkward behavior always feels authentic. This lends credibility to the proceedings particularly later in the story when completely bizarre events start to occur (some of the weirdness is reported to be loosely based on actual encounters described to the filmmaker by a friend who was a child actor). The later and more exaggerated moments involving Hollywood stars are very memorable, featuring entertaining and hilarious cameos that really make an impression.

As one might expect, there's a generally loose feel to the proceedings, and the meandering, episodic nature of the format does lead to some sections and scenes working more efficiently than others. Due to the troubled and flawed traits of the two central characters, some may experience difficulty relating to the protagonists, at least initially. And anyone expecting a traditional Hollywood coming-of-age tale will certainly be baffled by some of the crazy happenings onscreen.

But like the characters onscreen, it just takes a bit of time for the movie to grow into itself. As events progress, the characters shine through and their unique lives becomes more and more

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fun to watch. These are both slightly messed up people who aren't ideal for each other. Yet they also seem to be the only ones willing to support each other when situations get out of hand.

These ideas ultimately are what help make "Licorice Pizza" an interesting and engaging work of cinema.

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