

Midnight in Paris - time-travel celebrating the present

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by Chartreuse 20/10/2011 19.01

The Phoenix, East Finchley's art house cinema, seemed the appropriate place to watch an art house film with a ditto audience. Viewers from a single junior to mostly 40-plus filled most of the auditorium with enthusiastic chatter until the ratings certificate flicked up and an anticipatory silence fell.

This excellent film opened to my only criticism. The video tour of Paris, worthy of the city's tourist board, persisted too long in order to match the length of *Si Tu Vois Ma Mere* by Jazz musician Sidney Bechet. (So get a shorter tune.) It is shot as though through a white gold filter and the romantic glaze of the setting soon contrasts with the mismatched would-be novelist and his material girl. The unlikely casting of Owen Wilson, as Hollywood screenwriter Gil, produces a sensitive and diffident hero whose whimpishness contrasts with his forthrightly spoiled brat of a fiancée, Inez, rendered convincingly by Rachel McAdams.

Escaping one magic midnight into 1920's Paris leads to the lesson that the most exciting time is our own present. *Midnight in Paris* is a charming film, its potential audience limited only by some knowledge of the history of the arts in order to appreciate the humorously casual appearance of such figures as Hemmingway and Fitzgerald. In addition to which, there are no explosions, no body count and only a single chase.

If there is one film to make you feel optimistic about your life and times it is this one. Clever, witty and kind, I would judge it to be Woody Allen's best, as though the distance of the production from the involvement of himself and his traditional cast had perfected his vision. My movie buddy's single caveat about the film is Owen Wilson's too close approximation of Woody Allen.

As the other woman in Wilson's life, balanced against his 21st century bride-to-be's blond brashness, the luscious Marion Cotillard seems ideally cast as the wistfully alluring 1920's model. The film is also distinguished by the appearance of Carla Bruni as the sympathetic museum guide. Michael Sheen is wincingly mesmerising (in traffic-accident fashion) as Paul whose laboured lectures enthrall Inez as she perhaps recognises a kindred superficial spirit. Together they steamroller Gil setting the scene for a highlight. Gil's trips into the past equip him with artistic insight which he is able to display unexpectedly during a gallery tour to silence and dumfounded pedant Paul and his groupies. The Phoenix audience came close to applause.

If *Midnight in Paris* does not bring a post 9/11 flock of US citizens to the French capital, nothing will. Even London audiences, as the final credits roll, will be thinking: Eurostar.

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