

FILM

Snowbound

Yossi & Jagger exposes hot love in a cold world of war

BY LISA BRADSHAW

Yossi & Jagger is an easy movie to like.

Set on the border of Israel and Lebanon against the stark white-and-green checkered backdrop of a winter military base, Yossi and Jagger are young, cute commanders beholden to mandatory service in the Israeli army. They're in love, and the sexy tension between them stealing moments on base, sneaking away to get half-naked in the snow, is one bright promise in an otherwise disparaging landscape.

The movie, which played at Portland's queer film festival last fall and opens Jan. 23 at Cinema 21, has been a huge hit in Israel, which may seem surprising until you learn gay men and lesbians have been allowed in its military for more than 10 years. Gay stigma certainly exists, as evidenced in the film, and yet (or maybe because of it) soldiers and civilians alike have flocked to screenings, including one with combat fighters fresh from the West Bank engaging in a thoughtful post-show discussion with filmmakers.

Gay director Eytan Fox, whose first film was a short about sexual identity in the Israeli army, is doing for Israel in the world what he's doing for homosexuality in Israel—putting a human face on it. His shorts, feature film *Song of the Siren* and television series *Florentine*, most with queer characters, are precious pieces of art available to the Western world that illustrates life in Tel Aviv away from the barrage of war images we see as the only representatives of his small country.

Strategically, Fox cast "the Israeli Tom Cruise," Yehuda Levi, as Jagger. The national heartthrob stars in a soap opera, and teen-age girls apparently lined up to see *Yossi & Jagger* without even knowing what it was about.

Levi delivers as the outgoing platoon commander Jagger, singing along with gay club hits on his little transistor radio, teasing his more serious company commander boyfriend—a sexy power play both characters (and certainly viewers) seem to enjoy. In Jagger's hopeful, upbeat demeanor is the reminder of what he would be doing—what they all would and should be doing—but for their generation's political circumstance.



Soldier on soldier in a beautiful little movie from Israel that opens Jan. 23 at Cinema 21

Ohad Knoller as Yossi is a more interesting, complex character—balancing the responsibility of keeping his soldiers alive and well in rather desperate conditions, his tightly controlled passion toward his lover and the confusion of what might come next. To Jagger, military service will soon be over, and life is a cabaret; to Yossi, the military is life.

At a scant 70 minutes and with a soundtrack that often drifts into the elevator music genre, *Yossi & Jagger* sometimes feels like a Lifetime: TV for Men entry. And certainly there's no new army-movie material here. The company cook is the comic relief, the colonel who shows up unexpectedly is grouchy and sexist, the men are tired and nervous, the two women in the film are pretty—one is, of course, shyly attracted to Jagger.

It's the gay element at the heart of the film that lifts *Yossi & Jagger* from the dusty shelf of

M*A*S*H reruns. The actors have created a passion that leaps from the screen, and when Fox begins covering the army base in a blanket of tension, he never lets up. The ending is haunting and sweet without being maudlin.

Jagger at one point is trying to get Yossi to make some kind of promise for the future, to tell him he loves him. "Sorry this isn't some fucking American movie," Yossi spits.

No, no, it isn't. It took a troubled country with a citizenry embroiled in conflict over which they have little control and a film industry with few resources to deliver a movie to the U.S. about gay love and sex in the military.

Yossi & Jagger is the little movie that could. **J**

LISA BRADSHAW is the Arts and Culture Editor at Just Out.

OUT ON VIDEO/DVD



UNCONDITIONAL LOVE
New Line

Australian director P.J. Hogan's U.S. breakthrough was 1994's spry *Muriel's Wedding*, but don't let that fool you. His latest, *Unconditional Love*, which premiered last

year on the STARZ! cable network, continues the downward trend of his last film, 1997's *My Best Friend's Wedding*, a bland romantic comedy containing the intended comfort that somewhere, some very sheltered moviegoers were learning that, hey, a gay person (Rupert Everett, in a neutered role) could be Julia Roberts' pal!

Unconditional Love is the story of a Chicago housewife (Kathy Bates) abandoned by her husband (a comatose Dan Aykroyd) on the same day her flamboyant, Liberace-like pop idol (Jonathan Pryce) is murdered. Her daughter-in-law (Meredith Eaton), a confrontational little person who refers to herself as a dwarf to shock people, tries to talk her through the trauma, but she has her own neuroses to deal with.

So Bates travels to the English countryside home of her dead idol, where she encounters his siblings (including stuffy sister Lynn Redgrave) and his bereaved, crabby "valet" (Rupert Everett), who seems a bit more emotionally distraught over the demise of his "boss" than any servant should be. Eventually Bates and Everett team up against the singer's closed-minded family and their staid, closeted funeral plans.

Unconditional Love is being released into a post-*Queer as Folk* culture in which many middle-aged Midwestern women (like Bates' exaggeratedly fragile character) are at least worldly enough to watch *Sex and the City*. In that context, the movie is anachronistic and uninspired. I actually imagined large, sloshing buckets labeled "Whimsy" and "Pathos," with Hollywood technicians ladling copious amounts of each over Hogan's very soft skeleton of a script—and that was even before the arbitrary, ill-conceived action-adventure climax and self-impressed cameos by Julie Andrews, Barry Manilow and Sally Jessy Raphael.

Bates is game but is given nothing to work with. Everett does what he's best at: being strikingly handsome and nonthreateningly English, like Hugh Grant with a nicer body.

—Christopher McQuain **J**



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Hepatitis A and B are highly contagious viruses that affect the liver. Men who have sex with men are at greater risk for getting Hepatitis A and B. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association (GLMA) recommend a preventative vaccination.

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