# A QUIET LOVE

*Michael Haneke's* Amour *brilliantly captures the personal struggles of aging and death*

**AMOUR:** Written and directed by Michael Haneke. Cinematography, Darius Khondji. Editing, Nadine Muse and Monika Willi. Starring Emmanuelle Riva, Jean-Louis Trintignant and Isabelle Huppert. Sony Pictures Classics, 2012. PG-13. 127 minutes. ★ ★ ★ ★ ½

It's almost easier to talk about what director Michael Haneke (*Cache*, *The White Ribbon*) doesn't do than what he does. He doesn't hold the audience's hand; musical cues don't appear to direct your emotions and stories don't neatly wind up to logical conclusions. He doesn't give you a handy backstory or motivation for his characters, but expects you to find it in their interactions and, notably, their homes. In interviews, he avoids questions about themes, preferring to leave interpretation to his audiences. His films set people on edge, posing uncomfortable, taut questions about violence, guilt and human nature.

*Amour* is also a terrifying, difficult film full of questions — but at the same time, it's a tender, intimate film about the far reaches of love. Anne (Emmanuelle Riva) and Georges (Jean-Louis Trintignant), a long-married couple in their 80s, live in a comfortable flat in Paris. Their history suffuses their space: paintings, books, cozy chairs placed close together, a piano, the cluttered table in a small corner of the kitchen where they have their meals. One morning, Anne has a disturbing episode: For a few long moments, she stops responding, staring blankly into space. A few minutes later, she has no memory of what happened.

From there, Anne's health rapidly deteriorates. For a time, she's herself, though a stroke takes away movement on her right side. She asks Georges to promise not to take her back to the hospital, and he resists. The film never again leaves their apartment, moving slowly, gracefully through doorways, between the book-lined living room, the bedroom in which Anne spends increasing amounts of time, and the small, scruffy kitchen, which seems to belong in a different home.

Anne and Georges clearly have money, and choices; Georges could send Anne to hospice care, as their distant daughter, Eva (Isabelle Huppert), seems to want, though she never quite brings herself to say as much. But he doesn't, even as Anne sinks into herself, losing speech and motion, growing angrier. Though Huppert's role in the film is relatively small, Eva's relationship with her parents is a picture of generational disconnect. She means well, but she's not living the way Georges is; she can imagine, but she can't know. No one can, and Georges and Anne's world grows smaller and smaller, until there's barely room for the two of them.

A different director might be interested in this story as a social drama, a commentary on how Western culture sees aging and death, but Haneke carefully limits his film to the personal sphere; his questions aren't about what society should do, but what we would do when love and compassion are overruled by fear and pain. Unlike Haneke's last film, the crisp, black and white *The White Ribbon*, *Amour* is shot so naturally, and written so unsentimentally, that it almost feels like a documentary; the light is never unnaturally pretty, the apartment looks lived-in and there isn't a hint of vanity in the actors' astounding performances. Riva is a force, terrifying and unguarded as Anne struggles to retain her dignity; Trintignant draws in as the film goes on, his movements smaller, his expression strained.

*Amour* is sharp and unnerving, a precision-crafted story that can't be summarized, or praised, with the usual phrases. It's not enough to say that it's a painful investigation of an idea, or a brilliant performance, or a gripping story, though all of those things are true. Haneke's visual language is something distant and cool, disconcerting and familiar, sympathetic and intimate all at once. Never easy but always tender, *Amour* is quietly unforgettable, and one of the best films of the year. ■


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