



MEMBER PICKS

La La Land

La La Land

Director: Damien Chazelle
©: Summit Entertainment LLC
Production Companies: Lionsgate UK, Impostor Pictures
An Impostor Pictures / Gilbert Films production
Presented by: Summit Entertain, Black Label Media LLC, TIK Films (Hong Kong) Limited
Executive Producers: Mandy Smith, Trent Luckinbill, Thad Luckinbill, John Legend, Mike Jackson, Ty Stiklorius
Produced by: Fred Berger, Jordan Horowitz, Gary Gilbert, Marc Platt
Unit Production Manager: Michael Beugg
Production Co-ordinator: Kerri Smeltzer
Production Accountant: Whitney Lucci
Location Manager: Robert Foulkes
Post-production Supervisor: Jason Miller
1st Assistant Director: Peter Kohn
Script Supervisor: Lyn Matsuda Norton
Written by: Damien Chazelle
Director of Photography: Linus Sandgren
A Camera Operator: Ari Robbins
B Camera Operator: Davon Slininger
Still Photographer: Dale Robinette
InHouse Visual Effects Supervisor: John Weckworth
Visual Effects by: Crafty Apes
Special Effects Co-ordinator: Jeremy D. Hays
Film Editor: Tom Cross
Production Designer: David Wasco
Art Director: Austin Gorg
Lead Set Designers: Kevin Cross, Daniel Bradford
Set Decorator: Sandy Reynolds Wasco
Graphic Designer: Geoffrey Mandel
Property Master: Matthew Cavaliero
Costume Designer: Mary Zophres
Department Head Make-up: Torsten Witte
Department Head Hair: Barbara Lorenz
Main Titles Designed by: Shine
End Titles by: Scarlet Letters
Dailies Colourist: Matt Wallach
Digital Colourist: Natasha Leonnet
Score Composed by: Justin Hurwitz
Lyrics: Benj Pasek, Justin Paul
Featured Piano: Randy Kerber
Score Conducted by: Tim Davies
Choreography: Mandy Moore
Production Sound Mixer: Steve A. Morrow
Re-recording Mixers: Andy Nelson, Ai-Ling Lee
Stunt Co-ordinator: Mark Kubr
Dolby Sound Consultant: Jim Wright
Digital Intermediate by: EFilm
Filmed / Taped at: Hollywood Center Studios, (CA) Warner Bros. Studios (Burbank)
Cast:
Ryan Gosling (*Sebastian*)
Emma Stone (*Mia*)
John Legend (*Keith*)

La La Land, the new film by Damien Chazelle, is a cinematic ghost. This apparition is a movie musical, and it is set in Hollywood, the town that used to make this kind of film all the time, once upon a time. Nowadays, the musical genre is in a very uncertain place, at least as far as American cinema is concerned, which makes *La La Land* a spectre, haunting the scene of its own demise. Many will take one look at *La La Land* and say, 'They don't make 'em like that anymore,' but this expressive film has almost as much to say about the shaky future of the Hollywood musical, as its celebrated past.

In the film, Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone play Seb and Mia, two young wannabes who also find themselves in an uncertain place. Are they living in Los Angeles, or la la land? Are they destined for Hollywood or just living a delusion, hoping for a break that will never come? Seb is a jobbing musician who yearns to achieve greatness in his chosen form of jazz. Mia is an actress, or as Seb unkindly corrects her, a barista who attends a lot of auditions. They meet and fall in love, but the dreams that they are both chasing put their romance to the test. There's not much to the story, but there's more to this film than plot.

Seb and Mia have a strong appreciation for the classics and so does *La La Land* – it is deeply saturated in the style of classic Hollywood musicals and is even shot in richly tinted CinemaScope. In fact, the film promises a historical sweep of the genre from the very beginning, when a black-and-white square becomes gradually suffused with colour as it widens to its full size. It's a little like watching Ernst Lubitsch's talkie comedy *Ninotchka* (1939) grow into Rouben Mamoulian's *Silk Stockings* (1957), with 'glorious Technicolor/Breathtaking Cinemascope, and/Stereophonic sound' – as Cole Porter's lyrics described it. When people dance in *La La Land*, they do so in long-shot, head to toe, just like Fred and Ginger, or Gene Kelly and Cyd Charisse. Mia and the sets are both dressed either in rich primary colours that evoke luminous 1950s Technicolor, or the sugared almond palette of Jacques Demy's *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (1967), which shares with *La La Land* a jazzy score and a fragile emotional tone. A gorgeous ballet fantasia sequence includes swift visual allusions to a clatter of beloved predecessors, from *Broadway Melody of 1940* (1940) to *Singin' in the Rain* (1951), *Funny Face* (1956) and *An American in Paris* (1951).

Mia's flat, shared with fellow hopefuls, is plastered with old movie posters. Seb, alone in his sparse digs, obsesses over classic jazz records, playing bars over and over to commit them to memory. The film indulges his ambitions by picking him out with a spotlight when he breaks into his own compositions, but Mia gets the real star treatment. To seal her fate, she is caught prophetically in the projector's beam at a screening of CinemaScope classic *Rebel without a Cause* (1955).

Chazelle also took a cue from silent era 'city symphonies', and *La La Land* emphasises its urban setting, revolving around the local industry and making use of real-world locations. It opens with a freeway traffic jam that becomes the scene of a lustrous musical number in which the drivers dance joyfully while singing about the struggle that unites them (and Seb and Mia): the soul-destroying business of trying to make it in show-business. *La La Land* takes an oblique view on Hollywood: the closest we get to a soundstage is a fiery glimpse. The back offices where Mia auditions, spouting cheesy dialogue for grotty-sounding films (*'Dangerous Minds* meets *The OC*) in front of disdainful casting directors, are cramped and unromantic. Seb pays his bills playing Christmas carols and cover versions but dreams of opening a jazz club where aficionados can jam together, because his favourite haunt has been taken over and reopened as a baffling 'samba and tapas joint' – he bitterly mangles Oscar Wilde's definition of a cynic by describing LA as a place where people 'worship everything and value nothing'. Furthermore, the LA Seb and Mia live in no longer exists: the cinema they visit together – the Rialto in Pasadena – and the funicular they ride, both closed down years ago.

Rosemarie DeWitt (*Laura*)
Finn Wittrock (*Gregg*)
Callie Hernandez (*Tracy*)
Sonoya Mizuno (*Caitlin*)
Jessica Rothe (*Alexis*)
Tom Everett Scott (*David*)
Josh Pence (*Josh*)
Amiée Conn (*famous actress*)
Terry Walters
(*Linda, coffee shop manager*)
Thom Shelton (*coffee spiller*)
USA 2016©
128 mins
Digital

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Tinseltown may be tarnished, but while Seb and Mia are in love, the film takes on the glamour of their romance. There is pizzazz and even tinsel: swirls of pale spring blossom or fallen russet leaves, a blast of glitter from Mia's hairdryer and, most poetically, a cascade of plastic snow over a swimming pool at a Christmas party. Perhaps if Seb and Mia could stay in love for long enough, or hold on to their fantasies of stardom for long enough, Hollywood could get its groove back.

This is not Chazelle's first musical. His debut feature, the majority of which was made while he was still a film student, was a musical called *Guy and Madeline on a Park Bench* (2009). Chazelle intended *La La Land* to be his next project, but struggled to get funding for it, so in the interim he made *Whiplash* (2014), his hymn to jazz perfectionism, about a young drummer, bullied by his tutor, who sacrifices everything in pursuit of the immaculate tempo.

Stone and Gosling are no Rogers and Astaire. Mia even takes off her high heels before they dance, for shame, and the sequence's charm lies in the chemistry between the couple, and their breathy singing – certainly not the precision of their footwork. Thankfully, their most beautiful dance requires no fancy moves at all; as the pair rise on wires to the ceiling of the planetarium at the Griffith Observatory, the camera-work takes the strain. The visit is inspired by the movie they watch at the Rialto, *Rebel without a Cause* – when the film combusts, they escape to one of its key locations – and also by their shared obsession with stars of the non-galactic variety. Like the film's most spectacular musical sequence, towards the end of the film, this moment is entirely mediated through the characters' imagination and guided by their cinematic points of reference. That final musical sequence is the film's postmodern peak: a reimagining of its narrative as if it really were the kind of movie they used to make, as Stone and Gosling re-enact their romance in a series of set pieces inspired by classic musicals. This way the film ends twice, wrapping a 'Hollywood' happy ending culled from movie homages inside a more cynical conclusion, one that is in itself heavily signposted by allusions to *Casablanca* (1942).

Happily for Seb and Mia's clumsy feet, dancing seems to have gone out of style, or at least the show-stopping, finger-clicking perfectionism of the Hollywood chorus line, and the big-name soloists out front. Whereas a Golden Age musical might climax with the stars demonstrating their virtuosity in a series of musical spectacles escalating in grandeur, the key performances here, two piano-led songs, demonstrate a disdain for putting on the ritz. Seb and Mia duet on the song he spends the film perfecting, 'City of Stars', with downcast glances and cracked voices, side by side at the keyboard. Mia performs her 'Audition' number ('Here's to the ones who dream/ Foolish as they may seem') in jumper and jeans, eyes closed in one of those dreary casting-call offices. The emphasis is on the authenticity of the emotion, the construction of the song (Seb has painstakingly composed his; Mia, concentrating intensely, improvises hers on the spot), rather than visual display. With that, *La La Land* comes bang up to date, by assuming the mode of the 21st-century musical, in which the emphasis has shifted from the 'pure cinema' of a screen filled with geometrically arranged bodies to the aesthetics of authentic live performance, and more often than not a setlist of pre-approved classic tracks.

La La Land will no doubt remind many audiences of the pleasures of the Golden Age, ever-expanding sets, technical accomplishment and all. But if authenticity is the new razzle-dazzle, what does the future hold for Hollywood?

Imagine a musical that wasn't about musicals at all, but the world outside the cinema instead, a film that used the genre to explore more than its own glittery navel.

Hamilton, currently reigning on Broadway, tackles America's past, present and pop culture head-on; Danny Boyle and Frank Cottrell-Boyce's opening ceremony for the London 2012 Olympics did the same for Britain but with arguably grander designs. So why shouldn't the cinema follow suit? As the headlines increasingly recall the political and economic challenges that shadowed the rise of the musical in the 1930s, the time may be right for a passionate, irony-free throwback to the Golden Age – a *Gold-Diggers of 2016*. It's just a matter of shedding some inhibitions, and learning to tap-dance.

Pamela Hutchinson, *Sight and Sound*, January 2017