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Film Review: A Bigger Splash

Ralph Fiennes steals the show in a riveting erotic thriller from the director of 'I Am Love' about a foursome up to no good on a Mediterranean getaway.

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) May 4, 2016

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A Bigger Splash, an erotic melodrama by Luca Guadagnino, is wickedly entertaining yet tonally uneven, making it a slippery item to assess. Released a year after it bowed in the Venice fest, *Splash* resembles at many points the filmmaker's *I Am Love*: It lavishes the same attention on the androgynous beauty and magnetism of Tilda Swinton; foregrounds food and the artistry of preparing it; and delivers a stunning soundtrack ranging from The Rolling Stones,

to snippets of opera, to ominous electronic growls. Marvelous cinematographer Yorick Le Saux paints the screen with the hot colors of an island off the coast of Sicily.

Loosely based on Jacques Deray's film *La Piscine* (starring nonpareil beauties Alain Delon and Romy Schneider), *Splash* compels an amused—and, yes, prurient—fascination with the decadent doings of four very spoiled people. Rock legend Marianne Lane (Tilda Swinton) is recuperating from throat surgery on Italy's volcanic island of Pantelleria with her lover Paul (Matthias Schoenaerts), a documentary filmmaker. Their idyll, which features pool sex and mud baths in herbal springs, is interrupted—and, predictably, dislocated—when Marianne's old flame, flamboyant record producer Harry (Ralph Fiennes), shows up impromptu. In tow is his daughter Penelope, played by Dakota Johnson dragging a wheely bag of pouty sexuality—and with any luck she'll next be cast as a world-renowned neurosurgeon.

For enigmatic reasons, Marianne invites the pair to stay at her villa, as Paul smolders with resentment over the intrusion. Equally puzzling is the filmmaker's decision to keep Marianne mute; recovering from throat surgery to extend her singing career, she speaks only rarely in hoarse whispers. (The press notes state that when the character was conceived, Swinton simply wanted a time-out from talking—a bit of insidery whimsy that must have infuriated Italian film critics, who harbor some kind of grudge against Guadagnino and booed the film in Venice).

Know-it-all Harry, a manic extrovert, immediately seizes control, insisting they hit a restaurant tucked away in volcanic furrows known only to insiders. En route he takes a whiz on a grave. (When Paul objects, Harry shoots back, "All Europe's a grave.") It's soon clear that Harry's true agenda is to repair his break with Marianne, which he considers the great mistake of his life. This despite the fact that a flashback (awkwardly handled) reveals that he himself introduced her to his old buddy Paul. He seems to have brought along Penelope—a daughter he "discovered" only a year back—as a consolation prize for Paul. Johnson, whom you couldn't accuse of subtlety, eyes Paul while draped in suggestive poses like a wolf stalking an antelope. The queenpin of the foursome is Marianne, who messes with our heads by somewhat welcoming Harry's come-ons, even as she reassures Paul that she's sticking with him. The situation explodes in a collision of male egos baked by the sun to a fine heat.

Guadagnino keeps you off-balance and the suspense strung tight through a series of staccato scenes, some of them single takes, and elegant cutting. At every moment the film is visually gorgeous. Yet at times *Splash* feels like an uneasy blend of tourist porn (and the regular soft-core variety), peopled with characters who are not exactly relatable. The film includes a tacked-on reference to immigrants invading the island paradise that is frivolous and ill-advised. Disappointing, because *I Am Love*, arguably the best film of 2009, felt pitch-perfect.

Swinton is always mesmerizing, either nude or in designer duds, even though it's hard to divine what game she's playing—and equally hard to buy her as a rock star (even if she is the soul sister of David Bowie). As Paul, Schoenaerts combines his signature masculine magnetism with a hurt soulfulness, but his character is underutilized, underwritten. The talents of this arresting actor demand a more fleshed-out role. Johnson just does her thing as an object of male lust, 'nuf said.

The real show-stealer here is Ralph Fiennes as hyper Harry, clearly having the time of his life. Yakking nonstop, prancing poolside in the buff, or dancing to the Stones' "Emotional Rescue," he's both obnoxious and funny as hell. But also, behind the manic smile—watch the eyes—Fiennes captures Harry's desperation and nihilism. The complexity of his amazing turn should attract awards notice.

That Paul and Penelope will likely hook up is no surprise. What's more unusual is that throughout the film much is made of the outsize sexual appetite of Marianne—displayed in several scenes, and almost matched by coked-up Harry. Interestingly, both are played by actors in their mid-50s, their bodies on full display. It could be objected that people that age might have different, more compelling preoccupations. But perhaps, unlike in Hollywood, it takes a European filmmaker to acknowledge that eros prevails across a spectrum of ages.

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