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'Disobedience' Review: Forbidden-Love Romance Is Scorching – and Feast For Its Stars

Rachel Weisz and Rachel McAdams turn story of same-sex attraction in London's Orthodox Jewish community into steamy, slow-burn drama

★★★★★



'Disobedience' turns story of sapphic love in London's Jewish community into steamy slow-burn drama. Our review.

Yes, everyone's set to watch the Avengers chase evil to infinity and beyond this weekend. But you might want to check out *Disobedience* – a gorgeously acted, written and directed spellbinder set so far outside the Marvel universe that it thinks the problems of real people are far more compelling than a superhero mash-up. Ronit (Rachel Weisz, who also produced) is a British expat who's been working as a photographer in New York. Years later, she returns home to London and the Orthodox Jewish community from which she's exiled herself, to attend her estranged father's funeral. Despite the fact that she's the offspring of the local rabbi, Ronit receives a chilly reception from everyone she comes into contact with – even her childhood friend Dovid (the excellent Alessandro Nivola), who's been mentored over the years as the late patriarch's spiritual successor.

There's another hitch: Dovid is now married to Esti (Rachel McAdams), a timid schoolteacher who was also once the lover that Ronit's father caught her with as a teenager – and thus the partial cause behind our heroine's pariah status. The two women approach each other cautiously. Over the next few days, however, their buried feelings begin to recklessly re-emerge. This is a religious community that prohibits any physical contact outside of marriage between a man and a woman. Same-sex relationships aren't just fodder for scandal; they're definite deal breakers.

And so begins a tale of forbidden love set against an atmosphere of repression that only adds fuel to the fire. Based on the 2006 novel by Naomi Alderman, *Disobedience* – like all meaningful movies about the mysteries of love – never tips its hand to indicate where it's going. Director and co-writer Sebastián Lelio, the Chilean filmmaker fresh from his Foreign-Film Oscar win for *A Fantastic Woman* and working for the first time in English, lets action define character. Ronit and Esti exchange glances that are a roadmap to complex emotions and clashing worlds. The former's bohemian lifestyle is a rebuke to everything her father taught her, and Weisz gives a blazing performance that nails every subversive impulse in a character who only thinks she has it together. McAdams, for her part, is quietly devastating as a wife trying to measure what would be lost if she broke free to follow her heart.

The two women sneak off to a hotel in a scene that is already causing a stir for its unabashed frankness – Ronit spitting in Esti's mouth seems to have caused a few timid souls to break out in a sweat. The scene is erotic, but it's not the spittle or the nudity that gives the encounter its impact. What electrifies is the sight of two people expressing a fervor that runs deeper than sex. Weisz and McAdams, two extraordinary actresses at the top of their game, cut so deep into their characters you can almost feel their nerve endings. And Lelio lets their feelings play out, not in romantic fantasy, but in a real world where honesty comes at a price. Nivolo, as the pious husband, caught between flesh and spirit and searching for answers he can't find in the Torah, tears at the heart.

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Disobedience is a film that never preaches or judges. Without dialogue, Lelio creates a whole world that can be read eloquently and movingly on the faces of two superb actresses who give unstintingly to its creation. "May you live a long life," are the words exchanged frequently in this insular community. But for Esti and Ronit, it's ultimately the question of how you live a life that gives the film its soulful resonance. Their scenes together achieve a stabbing pathos that never crosses into sentimentality or sham. No one who sees the groundbreaking trail that the movie blazes is going to shut up about it. And why should they? You can discover a lot about yourself by getting lost in such a transcendent ode to passion. Surrender to it.