

Tribeca Review: Olivia Thirlby and Ben Feldman Have Commitment Issues in the Heartbreaking 'Between Us'

By David Ehrlich | Indiewire

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Rafael Palacio Illingworth's dour relationship drama is too knowing and relatable to ignore.



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You've seen this movie before, and sophomore writer-director Rafael Palacio Illingworth (2009's "Macho") knows it. "Between Us" is yet another micro-budget relationship drama about a young, white, and excruciatingly attractive L.A. couple who — when confronted with the prospect of real commitment — begin to panic at the thought that their lives are actually about to take shape.

But if "Between Us" doesn't try to reinvent the wheel, it articulates with distressing clarity the pressures that can simmer beneath even the most longstanding love stories. Henry ("Mad Men" alum Ben Feldman) is a thirtysomething filmmaker who's struggling to write a worthy follow-up for his once-popular debut feature. Dianne (Olivia Thirlby) is... an event planner, maybe? It's hard to pin down exactly what she does — she's a pretty girl who



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walks clients around empty industrial spaces and invites them to imagine how they might be able to fill them in a lucrative way. Content. Branding. Story. Forget it, guys; it's Los Angeles.

Henry and Dianne have more in common than they realize, even though they seem to have drifted towards different wavelengths. They share a severe (and occasionally screwy) sense of humor, which helps sell the illusion that we're spying on them behind closed doors; after coming to a major agreement, they begin chanting and dancing around their apartment, less like they're celebrating and more like they're trying to appease King Kong. Thirlby and Feldman are both on the same page, and the affection they share is just as convincing as their distress. For anyone who's ever lived with their partner, watching this movie will be like staring into a very flattering funhouse mirror.

And yet, just because Henry and Dianne live in the same house doesn't necessarily mean that it's not a long-distance relationship. They both recognize the space between them, they just see it differently. He's an optimist, and she's not. He's petrified of the future, and she's not (no wonder his new script is about time travel). He's anxious that people think Dianne is too good for him, and she would never entertain the thought. Watching the movie, it feels like they're mutually responsible for the rift that forms between them — reflecting on it afterwards, it's hard to deny that Henry is at fault. When Dianne falls in love with a new apartment and asks Henry to buy it with her, to become property owners together, he's the one who starts to asphyxiate. He's the one who drops the bomb, delivering a millennial cover version of the speech that Nicole Kidman gives to Tom Cruise in "Eyes Wide Shut" as she stumbles and slurs her way across their bedroom and tells him about the sailor she once fantasized about fucking.

Here, Henry puts the thoughts into Dianne's head: "The lively girl you were when I first met is still inside, I just can't have her anymore. If you met a new guy tomorrow you would just fuck everywhere, and you wouldn't care if he had health insurance, or a good job — he'd be your top priority. That's what kills me: Someone else can have it, but not me. Because I'm here."

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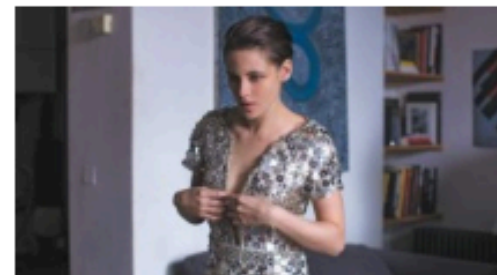
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It's a monologue that sends both parties reeling off into the night. Henry meets a tall girl with a pixie cut (Analeigh Tipton) who's the physical manifestation of second thoughts. Combative, down for orgies, and rocking a little heart tattoo under her right ear, she's younger than Henry has ever felt in his life. Dianne, for her part, goes down a similar road (one that ultimately leads her to Adam Goldberg).

Illingworth cleverly uses the most banal tropes of modern day moviemaking in order to measure the distance between these two partners, and show how they retreat into the hermetic headspace of selfishness. Texting can be a real drag in a romantic drama, but rather than go the unrealistic route and pretend that it doesn't exist, Illingworth presents each message as a scrawl of white words against a silent black void. When someone puts themselves out there and gets involved in one of those text chains that says things they wouldn't dare say in person, they read it in the middle of a busy intersection and the rest of the world would still fade away — "Between Us" is the first movie to palpably convey what that feels like. Illingworth's sporadic use of voiceover creates a different but equally effective sense of intimacy, Henry and Dianne's interior monologues floating by each other like two ships in the night. These affectations complement Todd Banhazl's strikingly supple cinematography, which allows every close-up to read like a novel and teases a sense of infinite possibility from the nighttime darkness into which the film eventually submerges.

Only one visual flourish strikes a bum note: the CG cloud that bookends the film, hovering a few feet above the floor of Henry and Dianne's apartment. Much like its characters, "Between Us" trips up when it imagines things that aren't there. It also doesn't always fill in the things that are. These characters are so narrowly defined by their issues that they aren't allowed to become anything more than totems for generational anxieties. It's tough to hit the sweet spot between realism and universality, but Illingworth cheats too much to the latter, resulting in a movie that's effectively relatable but asks more from its audience than it's able to give back in return.



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"Between Us" may be too familiar to feel like it's showing us things we can't see for ourselves, but Illingworth's film holds together on the strength of its conviction. It never backs down from the idea that commitment issues are seldom about the other person — more often than not, they're about reconciling the life someone imagined for themselves with the one there were lucky enough to get. After 30 years of thinking about the future as an infinitely pliable wad of clay, you wake up one day and realize that you might have to stick what you've got into the kiln. If nothing else, this movie bottles what it feels like to have your feet held to the fire.

Grade: B

"Between Us" premieres this week at the Tribeca Film Festival. It is currently seeking U.S. distribution.

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