

REVIEW

WHAT 'LA LA LAND' AND 'FIFTY SHADES' GET WRONG ABOUT LOVE

BY JEANNE SAFER

ROMANTIC LOVE is getting a reboot at the movies. Two big current pictures—"La La Land," which has been nominated for 14 Oscars, and "Fifty Shades Darker," a sequel to "Fifty Shades of Grey," which has grossed more than a half-billion dollars world-wide since its 2015 release—offer radically different takes on intimate relationships and the role of sexual passion in contemporary life.

Both movies depict tumultuous liaisons of heterosexual couples, but there the similarity ends (warning: plot spoilers ahead). "La La Land," the candy-colored throwback musical about an actress and a jazz pianist struggling to make it in Los Angeles, begins as a standard love story: The lovers start out disliking each other, only to become each other's fans and cheerleaders. But their success ultimately pushes them apart. Though both fulfill their artistic dreams, their union is undone by an inability to commit and to deal with obstacles.

Just in time for Valentine's Day, the monochromatic "Fifty Shades Darker" returns to the first movie's sadomasochistic themes. Though it presents itself as a soft-core porn fantasy, the movie is conventional at its core. Whips, chains, leather straps and riding crops may have become the aphrodisiacs du jour in some circles, but this time around the plot—heavier on melodrama than the first—leads inexorably to the oldest trope in movies, a marriage proposal. It's "Pride and Prejudice" redux, without the wit or the wisdom.

"La La Land" is more radical in its way. It's a genuine departure from the typical romantic formula because ambition, in the end, trumps love. The seemingly ill-assorted hero and hero-



TRUE LOVE? Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone in 'La La Land.'

ine encourage and applaud each other—he tempering her insecurity and she his grandiosity—but they can't figure out how to stay together through a temporary separation. When lovers are too immature to deal with conflicts, love does not conquer all. It is a darker but perhaps more realistic view of the two-career relationship than we usually get at the movies.

Despite their self-consciously naughty accouterments, the "Fifty Shades" movies are actually a steamy variant of a very old fantasy: the idea that the love of a good woman—and in this case, her submission to degrading sexual practices to save her beloved from his tortured past—can transform a cold man into a warm one.

But it never does. It's a pernicious fantasy of relentless hope, whose harmful effects I see ev-

ery day in my psychotherapy practice (and experienced, fortunately long ago, in my own life).

Like most fiction that moves us, both of these movies speak to our fears and longings, combining elements of reality and fantasy. Even though the relationship between the struggling artists in "La La Land" has the ring of truth—their dialogue could have been lifted verbatim from the conversations an actress patient of mine reports having daily with her actor boyfriend—its denouement depends on an utterly improbable plot twist. It's hard to imagine that a famous casting director would really show up at the one-woman show of an unknown actress and then build a movie around her.

As for the tormented billionaire hero of the "Fifty Shades" saga, he may stop whipping the

heroine in Part II (now he just spanks her and only when she asks for it), but it doesn't change his insanely controlling personality. It's a transformation of sorts—but not exactly a recipe for a good marriage.

I have been troubled to discover how many young women, including patients of mine and their contemporaries, accept the premises of movies like "Fifty Shades of Grey" and consider behavior that is perverse and degrading as liberated, and not just in fantasy. Though very few of them, fortunately, include physical masochism in their repertoires, many tolerate casual hookups with would-be partners and endure sex without pleasure. They hope to please the difficult men in their lives and win their love, like junior varsity versions of the "Fifty Shades" heroine Anastasia Steele. In these relationships, both sexes suffer, and genuine intimacy becomes much harder.

I very much believe that modern life offers valuable new perspectives on the old story of romantic love, but I also wonder what have we lost. To my mind, both of these blockbuster movies miss an essential point: that change has to come first from within before anyone can be truly receptive to someone else's love.

In "La La Land" and "Fifty Shades Darker," we see no evidence of characters learning anything new about themselves. What strikes me most about both films is the utter absence of self-reflection, no moment suggesting that the key to profound and lasting love is the inner development of the lover.

That's an insight that no classic love story lacks. As they used to say in the movies, happiness must be earned.

Dr. Safer is a psychotherapist and the author of "The Golden Condom and Other Essays on Love Lost and Found" (Picador).