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Layla

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Layla

Abstract

This is a film review of *Layla* (2024), directed by Amrou Al-Kadhi.

Keywords

Transgender, Non-binary, Islam

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Author Notes

Chris Deacy is Reader in Theology and Religious Studies and former Head of Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK. His PhD (University of Wales, 1999) was in the area of redemption and film, and Chris has published monographs which include *Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular, and the Sacred* (Oxford University Press, 2016); *Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology and Film* (Routledge, 2012); and *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (University of Wales Press, 2001). Chris also writes regular film reviews, is writing a book about nostalgia and religion and has been hosting a podcast since 2018 called *Nostalgia Interviews with Chris Deacy* - <https://audioboom.com/channels/4956567>



Layla (2024), dir. Amrou Al-Kadhi

Layla is a British film that it isn't as transgressive as its subject matter would suggest: the director is a non-binary Muslim drag performer, as is the film's lead character, with the stage name of Layla (Bilal Hasna). The film charts the way queer relationships can be developed against the backdrop of conservative family and religious traditions. What we see is Layla and their new partner Max (Louis Greateorex) struggling to explore and learn from each other, but the challenges they encounter don't always feel authentic. One moment, Max appears to be ghosting Layla after their first sexual encounter, but later it is Max who feels Layla is the one keeping their distance.

They go to the cinema, but Layla telling Max the gay drama is just 'okay' leads to tensions which feel manufactured to illustrate the fissures in their relationship. And they have both told falsehoods to their family members about each other so that both Max and Layla feel betrayed and ostracized by the other, yet they have both done the same thing, again leading to tensions that feel cosmetic and contrived. Here are two tentative souls embarking on a new relationship who

encounter setbacks along the way which ultimately serve to keep them apart, thus going against the grain of what we habitually expect from a romantic comedy. More could have been made of the serious issues underlying the surface.

We are briefly introduced to Layla's conservative Muslim parents who assume they have a respectable job, is heterosexual and a dutiful Muslim, and this is presented as having a capacity for humor because we realize how out of touch they are with their child. And Layla tells Max that they are estranged from their sister, which is not only untrue, but the sister is actually the one who yearns to connect and accepts Layla for everything they stand for. These manufactured crises serve to undermine what otherwise works as such an intriguing commentary on counterparts and counterpoints, with Max's dull corporate day job, matched by the grey suits he wears, at odds with the more flamboyant drag persona of Layla who applies false eyelashes and lipstick before going out.

Layla is certainly worth seeing for its penchant for putting at its center characters who are not black-and-white, heroes or villains. Rather, we see life in its inherent, prosaic messiness: there are universal dimensions here in terms of how audiences of all sexualities can relate to the highs and lows of relationships, and how moments of extreme exuberance and ecstasy at the beginning of a relationship fast mutate into something less than sublime as the differences between them come to the fore. We see Max and Layla as a viable couple, but we also sense that these are characters on a journey through life, and the conclusion suggests that it is perhaps only when one is truly accepted by one's family that one can really settle into themselves and seek the relationships they deserve rather than the ones that they choose from the vantage point of ostracism and rejection.