

A Romeo and Juliet story of Hope vs Fatalism

'Five Feet Apart' is a beautiful love story that suffers from having too much to say.

The international cystic fibrosis community is fortunate for the exposure and consideration that a movie like this brings to our cause. On the one hand it is a curated, stylised portrayal of just one window on CF life. On the other hand, we are fortunate that it is a charming and thoroughly enjoyable piece of cinema, full of funny and genuinely touching moments. We are fortunate because that kind of awareness is good, good, good for CF causes.

'Five Feet Apart' is fundamentally a Romance: An idealistic and energetic young woman named Stella falls for the subversive anti-social charms of troubled teen Will Newman in a Romeo and Juliet story of Hope vs Fatalism, Youth vs Responsibility and Everyone vs the burden that is cystic fibrosis.

'Five Feet Apart' does not take its CF premise for granted, or relegate CF to a background factor or an excuse to create drama. Characters discuss their symptoms, treatments and therapies. Their ability to interact with and move forward in the plot is very much informed by the circumstances that CF creates in their lives. They fight for their health and are open and articulate about it - fearless actually.

Cystic fibrosis realities dominate the storyline and dialogue of this film, and that, I feel, is only fair. If the filmmakers had brushed these realities aside in favour of convenient love story tropes, then the film would just feel inauthentic and untrue to its subject matter. It would be an exploitation, not an exploration.

There are moments (such as at the snowy climax of the film) where medical good sense takes a backseat to dramatic action. However, it is established that Will Newman is a bit of a reckless dude and has had that influence on Stella, and so the events of the film still fit its characters.

The film is well acted, though with few standouts. Claire Forlani is hideously under-used as the rich have-it-all power-mom trying to bat for her sick child against a disease that she can't negotiate with or control. C'est la vie, the story belongs to Will and Stella, and they both do an excellent job, with Haley Lu Richardson being believably eccentric and sincere and Cole Sprouse being believably moody.

The film takes a balanced attitude to the perspectives of the nurses, doctors, patients and parents/sibling/friends that make up foot traffic in their CF ward.

The cinematography treads a fine line, but manages to neither glamourise the claustrophobic hospital setting of the film nor allow it to become visually monotonous. There is some effective use of POV camera throughout, with certain scenes blending in 'Youtube'-style webcam footage of Stella.

Almost the entire film takes place within Hospital walls. This was surprising, given the film's long running time, but it serves to keep CF in the forefront of the narrative. Some of the final scenes take place outside in the winter snow, and this would be much more of a breath of fresh air were it not for some egregious green screen effects that take away from the immersion.

The film is at its strongest in its montage scenes, where we get to see Stella taming and untangling the surly Will Newman. However, all of the character development takes place fairly early on, leading to a slight sagging sensation after the second Act.

On the whole I give 'Five Feet Apart' four out of five feet apart for its sincerity and earnest commitment to the subject matter - at no point did I feel that the film treated cystic fibrosis with irreverence or tokenism.

Reviewed by Possum Rock