

Downtown Express: Film Review

April 19, 2012
By Frank Scheck



The Bottom Line

Terrific music but tepid drama is on display in this drama about a classical violinist torn between two worlds.

Cast

Philippe Quint, Nellie McKay, Michael Cumpsty, Carolyn McCormick, Ashley Springer, Declan Bennett, Jade Synstelién, Chris Eddleton, Igor Fonberg

Director

David Grubin

The musical drama centers on a talented violinist who is torn between his father's classical aspirations and his own desire to join a group of street musicians.

The Jazz Singer meets Once in David Grubin's musical drama about a talented violinist who is torn between his father's classical aspirations and his own desire to join a group of street musicians led by a fetching pianist. But while *Downtown Express* suffers from a derivative storyline, it offers enough musical authenticity to provide ample compensations.

Much of that verisimilitude stems from the fact that the two leads -- four-time Grammy nominee Philippe Quint and pop singer/songwriter Nellie McKay -- are actually well-known performers who are here given an excellent showcase for their musical, if not necessarily acting, talents.

Quint plays Sasha, a Juilliard student who is being groomed for stardom by his Russian émigré, classical musician father Vadim (Michael Cumpsty). Sasha is preparing for a Carnegie Hall recital that will announce his talent to the world. But he becomes distracted after coming across a funky street band, *Downtown Express*, and becomes smitten with its lead singer, Ramona (McKay).

You can imagine how the rest of the story goes. Will Sasha dutifully trod the path that his father has laid for him of playing the music of the great Russian composers, or will he pursue his own dreams, which seem like a lot more fun? Complicating matters further is the improbable romance that develops between the old-world father and Sasha's gorgeous, refined teacher (Carolyn McCormick).

Featuring plenty of musical performances ranging from classical to pop/rock, the film is a fine showcase for Quint's superb playing and McKay's charmingly eccentric vocal stylings. Director Grubin well captures the atmosphere of the NYC locations including subway platforms and downtown clubs. The film may be hopelessly old-fashioned, but it's hard to entirely resist its portrait of a city that not only never sleeps but also seems to be bursting with melody at every turn.

Opens: Friday, April 20 (International Film Circuit)

Cast: Philippe Quint, Nellie McKay, Michael Cumpsty, Carolyn McCormick, Ashley Springer, Declan Bennett, Jade Synsteliën, Chris Eddleton, Igor Fonberg

Director: David Grubin

Screenwriter: Kathleen Cahill

Producers: David Grubin, Michael Hausman

Executive producer: Tyrone Brown

Director of photography: Edward Murriz

Editor: Jeffrey Wolf

Music: Michael Bacon, Nellie McKay

Production designer/costume designer: Hilary Rosenfeld

No rating, 90 min.

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/downtown-express-film-review-314178>