

VARIETY

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Nostalgic, warm romantic comedy. Needs careful handling.

Though spiraling production and promotion budgets currently conspire against the "small picture," Steven Paul's "Falling in Love Again" demonstrates that unpretentious, personal filmmaking is far from dead. Largely a family project for the Paul clan, this modestly budgeted romance could find an audience as a people-intensive film, with warm, easy-to-identify with characters rather than currently fashionable shock values.

Elliott Gould, in his perhaps best, most comfortable performance in several years, is perfectly cast as Harry Lewis, a New Yorker entering middle age, suffering the usual crisis and recalling the good old days of his youth. On a cross-country trip by car with his family, en route to a high school reunion in the Bronx, Gould narrates flashbacks of his romance with Susannah York (played by Michelle Pfeiffer as teenager) in the '40s.

Lewis (played by Stuart Paul as a youth) went after and married the beautiful, "unattainable" rich girl. His hopes of career success did not materialize, with duo currently owning a clothing business which York runs while Gould dreams of becoming an architect.

Crosscut with present-day footage, the '40s scenes feature fine ensemble comedy of Stuart Paul and friends' antics, as well as their serious effort to mount a local scrap drive to support the war. Nostalgic approach includes a well-directed seduction sequence as Paul succumbs to the wiles of a beautiful young (but older than he) house-wife (played by the stunning Cathy Tolbert). Jewish milieu is well-delineated, with a brassy Kaye Ballard very funny as Paul's mom.

After inevitable conflicts erupt during the trip, Gould is disillusioned upon arrival in New York, with the deterioration of his old neighborhood. Film climaxes with an incisive, beautifully-played scene in a restaurant where Gould is shooting his mouth off with his old buddies. York slips in unnoticed to silently observe, and in a very well-judged switch, Gould suddenly turns serious and pours out his true feelings regarding York and his goals in life. With York an almost ghost-like presence here, both thespians shine.

Young actor-turned director Steven Paul shot "Falling in Love Again" last year at age twenty, but his feel for a past era and emphasis upon old-fashioned (but still effective) picture values belie his youthful status. Pic artfully captures the '40s look and feel, with color stock-footage an effective budget stretcher for shots of old New York beyond the neighborhood. Michel Legrand's score works well in whipping up sentiment, though he lapses into a corny pastiche of Bill Conti's "Rocky" theme during an action sequence.

Gould and York, re-teamed after their "The Silent Partner" stint, have been allowed by the young helmer to actively collaborate in the filming with York receiving a co-scripting credit. Film benefits from their personal involvement, with Gould a very sympathetic central figure and York selflessly alternating supportive scenes with confrontational outbursts, all designed to help the film rather than steal the spotlight. Interesting structure has some flashback material late in the pic presented from her point-of-view, departing from the "Gould's story" premise.

Michelle Pfeiffer makes a strong impression as York's younger self, with a dreamy look in her eyes which is quite distinctive. Stuart Paul is convincing as Gould's young ego and the director acquits himself well as a negative influence in the old neighborhood.