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Even in fourth iteration, 'A Star is Born' still shines

Cooper's directorial debut and Gaga's first big-screen moment is magnetic, memorable



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It's an American fable, durable as "Cinderella" and romantic as "Romeo and Juliet."

In this evergreen Pygmalion story of "A Star is Born," a famous man discovers and marries a talented young woman, then self-destructs when her star eclipses his.

Fredric March and Janet Gaynor were the doomed couple in 1937; James Mason and Judy Garland in 1954 and Kris Kristofferson and Barbra Streisand in 1976.

Now Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper headline this Kleenex-depleting chestnut as Ally Campana and Jackson Maine.

Cooper, in addition to starring in the movie, co-wrote the screenplay and some of the songs, directs the film and, most surprisingly, holds his own vocally opposite Lady Gaga.

Ally's dotting gay best friend and wingman, Ramon, a bouncer at the drag bar where she sings, is the adorable Anthony Ramos ("Hamilton," "Monsters and

Men"). Ramos is clearly beside himself to have a highly visible role in such a big movie at Gaga's side. We couldn't be happier for him.

Andrew Dice Clay, the former comedian who in the 1990s specialized in sexist and racist insult humor, is apparently back from exile.

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He charmingly — yes, charmingly — plays Lorenzo, Ally's limo-driver father. Lorenzo is a recovering alcoholic, and he knows how to handle an out-of-control drunk even when it's the famous son-in-law he fawningly admires.

Sam Elliott is usually the hottest guy in any movie, but this is Bradley Cooper's show. As Jackson's much older brother, Bobby,

Elliott provides twangy gravitas. There's tension between the two because Jackson has become famous by lifting Bobby's vocal style, and one of the subliminal pleasures of the movie is listening to the sonorous cragginess of Cooper's voice as he imitates Elliott.

Cooper's dog Charlie is cast as

the couple's cheerful canine companion.

Since getting his star card stamped with the "Hangover" series, Cooper has taken on challenged and wounded characters: an Iraq War veteran with PTSD in "American Sniper," a bipolar divorcee in "Silver Linings Playbook" and a con artist in "American Hustle."

He is effortless as Maine, a kindly abusive alcoholic. As director, actor, and even as singer, Cooper gets Maine.

Although stratospheric as a musician, "A Star is Born" is Gaga's first feature film of any substance. Ally's looks are her Achilles heel, and Gaga takes a huge risk by appearing without the conceptual costumes and glittery makeup of the Gaga character. She is beautiful in the way that Cher is beautiful — partly because she is exotic, but mostly because she wills it to be so.

We are intended to experience Ally as an authentic person, Gaga unmasked.

There is a scene in which Ally's manager, the villain of the movie, pressures her to dye her hair and camp herself up. Ally pushes back. She knows she's got talent and doesn't believe she needs such props.

The irony is not lost on us. We know what the future held for the former Stefani Germanotta who was once confronted with a similar choice.

Cooper has a strong directorial hand and doesn't veer off onto self-indulgent tangents. He uses lots of close-ups, knowing that we can't get enough of him and certainly not enough of Gaga.

The chemistry between Cooper and Gaga is magnetic, as is the actors' chemistry with the audience. As far as this film is concerned, the lovers are the only people in the world. They are all we want to see.

The movie ends with the largest, longest close-up in the history of show business.

The screen is filled with Gaga's face.

A movie star is born.