



Pillion: a feel-good British BDSM drama

Alexander Skarsgård's Ray guides Harry Melling's Colin through a journey of sexual discovery in Harry Lighton's cleverly written feature debut.

Pillion

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Love comes in all shapes and sizes. For Colin (Harry Melling), a floppy haired traffic warden, it comes in the superhuman form of a leather clad Alexander Skarsgård, playing Ray, a biker who sees something in Colin and decides to take him on an erotic ride of submission and domination. Colin's job puts him in the firing line of almost daily abuse and opprobrium. So, he's certainly primed for the arrival of Ray, who in his rubber boots and with his Clint Eastwood like taciturnity, feels like an alien who has just landed from Planet Thirst.

Colin has been getting by so far with men his mother Peggy (Lesley Sharp) has set him up with and singing in barber shop quartet with his dad, Pete (Douglas Hodge), wearing costumes and straw boaters. It's here that he meets Ray, who establishes his alpha-male credentials by riding roughshod over bar queuing etiquette. Could there be an act more transgressive to the British male?

In a measured development of their relationship, we, as an audience, and Colin are introduced to the subculture of subs and doms. On his first date – at the back of a Primark on Christmas night – Ray asks Colin if he “gives”, this being a prerequisite of their potential relationship. Colin will clean and cook for Ray, do the shopping and sleep on the floor at the foot of his bed, while Ray's pit bull shares his master's duvet. He will have his hair (thankfully) cut and begin to socialise with a larger gang of bikers, all of whom have their subs riding pillion. Even in the context of the gang, Ray is an Adonis and Colin can't quite believe his luck but also worries about his precarious position.

Despite the saltiness of its subject matter, Harry Lighton's film – which is adapted from Adam Mars-Jones' novel *Box Hill* – exists within the recognisable tradition of the feel-good English comedy. Think Richard Curtis but with butt plugs. There's no coming out scene; no episode of homophobia. Colin's family are not just accepting of his sexuality but do their best to hook him up with lads and encourage him to go on dates, though they can't help being helplessly inappropriate, asking whether Colin kissed Ray on their first date. They didn't... unless fellatio counts.

And there's a genuine non-judgmental attitude taken towards a type of sexual relationship which might at first appear strange to some audiences. It neither neuters it to win our acceptance, nor serves up a trajectory which ultimately bends towards 'normality', whatever that is. The one subplot that could veer towards

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mawkishness – Peggy has terminal cancer – is relieved by the subtle writing which never lingers and Lesley Sharp’s spirited performance. In fact, she is gifted a couple of the best zingers and delivers them with aplomb, including her observation that Ray doesn’t seem like “a Chislehurst type of person” (Skarsgård plays the role with his American accent intact).

Quite so. He looks more like something plucked from the imagination of Rainer Werner Fassbinder. He’s a little like Julia Robert’s movie star in *Notting Hill* (1999), swooping into a boring British life – Colin lives in Bromley – and transforming it with transatlantic glamour. This glamour doesn’t necessarily extend beyond Skarsgård’s Hollywood God looks. There’s a picnic by the river with the gay bikers’ club, some of whom are played by the Gay Bikers Motorcycle Club, which looks as muddy and rain-threatened as any picnic in England usually is. Nick Morris’ camera captures the nighttime streets and the empty suburban spaces, relieved only by the lively warmth of the few remaining pubs.

Some relationships are meant to last forever; others might be passing. That doesn’t make them any less valid. What the film assures us of is that this is transformative for Colin and perhaps Ray too. There’s a central mystery to Ray which Skarsgård successfully conveys while also suggesting that when it comes down to it, there might not be much there. Colin on the other hand discovers in himself “an aptitude for devotion” and whether your relationship is heteronormative or something else altogether, that’s not a bad thing to realise.

By John Bleasdale, Sight and Sound
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