

'Before I Fall': 'Groundhog Day' gets teen makeover

In the quarter century since the release of the cult classic film "Groundhog Day," filmmakers of all genres have used the "time loop" as a narrative device. The concept is simple: characters experience the same day again and again, often having to figure out some universal truth to reform their characters and break the cycle. Now indie director Ry Russo-Young has revisited the premise in "Before I Fall," which hits theatres yesterday, with the original movie's thirtysomething protagonists replaced with a cast of sassy millennials to appeal to the lucrative young adult market. In "Groundhog Day," it is the selfish, arrogant weatherman Phil Connors, played by an acclaimed Bill Murray, who is forced to relive the same events until he decides to be a better man.

Harold Ramis's comedy has spawned more than 30 copycats to varying degrees of success—from Disney's "Mickey's Once Upon a Christmas" in 1999 to the 2015 sci-fi flop "Project Almanac." Although "Groundhog Day" was only moderately successful on its release, it came to be considered one of the greatest-ever comedies over time, listed as a "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" milestone in the US National Film Registry. Ry-Russo prepared for his updated version by watching time-loop movies such as "Primer" and "Edge of Tomorrow." "For me, part of the research process is really covering a lot of ground and really understanding the different intersecting genres," she said.

Brooding

Shot over just 24 days, "Before I Fall" follows Samantha Kingston, a student in the "in crowd" who is about to lose her virginity to another of the popular kids. Played by 22-year-old rising star Zoey Deutch, Sam finds herself trapped in a



This file photo shows (From left) Ry Russo-Young, Zoey Deutch, Lauren Oliver and Jennifer Beals attending the 'Before I Fall' New York Special Screening at Landmark Sunshine Cinema. — AFP

time loop, destined to repeat the day of her death in an auto accident over and over. Maria Magenti's screenplay moves the action from the New England of Lauren Oliver's young adult novel of the same name to the brooding majesty of the rainy Pacific Northwest. "The landscape offered a lot for Sam's psychology," the 35-year-old Russo-Young said. "There's sort of a moodiness, and a sense of mortality, drama and angst to those visuals that felt like a charac-

ter who is between life and death, who's trying to figure it out."

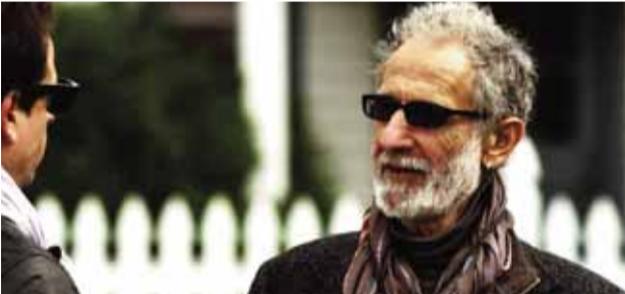
Sam's journey takes her through the various stages of confusion, grief, terror and acceptance as she tries to figure out what the cosmos has in mind for her. "The challenge with any repeat-day construct is that you have to make it feel fresh every day and not like you're watching the same scene," Russo-Young said. "And the good news is it's not the same scene because Sam is in

a completely different psychological and emotional place." The cast teams Deutch ("Vampire Academy," "Dirty Grandpa") and the up-and-coming 23-year-old Halston Sage ("Paper Towns," "Scouts Guide to the Zombie Apocalypse") with veterans like Jennifer Beals 34 years after she made her name in "Flashdance."

Good life

Like all time-loop movies, Russo-Young's fourth feature—her third in a row to premiere at the Sundance Film Festival—plays out as a parable about redemption and what it means to live a good life. It also offers lessons on sexual pressure, the stresses of social media and the fragility of teenage friendships. "When I watched it for the first time, it culminated in this weird feeling of a celebration of life, which I felt was so powerful and moving," Deutch said. "I recognized in people that were watching that they wanted to do good... Literally, I felt a sense of warmth and wanting to do good." Deutch, who was bullied at middle school, says she immediately connected with a character whose flaws didn't define her.

"She's a follower in the beginning and becomes her own leader in her life," she said. "Before I Fall" was a hit with the Sundance crowd and has been earning generally favorable reviews. "These are two talented women who deserve to be elevated with the next projects they're offered," Brian Formo of the online movie magazine "Collider" wrote of Deutch and Russo-Young. "Before I Fall" could've been boilerplate. It often boils over with perfectly observed truths." — AFP



This image released by the Tribeca Film Festival shows filmmaker Antonino D'Ambrosio with retired New York City Police detective Frank Serpico, who is the subject of a documentary, 'Frank Serpico,' which will premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival. — AP

Docs about Whitney Houston, Frank Serpico headed to Tribeca

Documentaries about Whitney Houston, Gilbert Gottfried, Elian Gonzalez and Frank Serpico will premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival. The New York festival announced 82 of the 98 features that will play in this year's slightly slimmed-down slate. Among the entries are "Gilbert," Neil Berkeley's documentary about the comedian; "Elian," the Alex Gibney-produced documentary about the famous Cuban boy; "Frank Serpico," Antonino D'Ambrosio's film about the 1970s New York police officer; and the Houston documentary "Whitney: Can I Be Me."

Other films include "LA 92," about the Rodney King riots, and an investigation into the handling of rape kits in "I Am Evidence." Among the narrative films announced is Michael Winterbottom's latest road trip with Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon, "The Trip to Spain." Also premiering is Adam Rifkin's "Dog Years," about an aged former Hollywood star played by Bert Reynolds. And writer-director Azazel Jacobs will debut her latest, "The Lovers," in which Tracy Letts and Debra Winger play a long-married couple whose romance is sparked again when they separate. The 16th annual Tribeca Film Festival runs April 19-30. — AP

RSVP 'no' to 'Table 19'

Review

Silted conversations. Empty niceties. Forced joy. That overwhelming sense that it might have been better to just stay at home in sweats. It's that horrifying feeling you get being at a bad wedding with people you barely know. And, as it turns out, it's also the experience of watching "Table 19," a movie about being at a bad wedding at a table with people you barely know. While that unpleasant sensation might be tolerable (and even kind of clever) for a first act set up, in the awfully generic "Table 19," it never fades and even gets worse as the labored wackiness gives way to trite sentimentality. The premise is to spend the course of a wedding reception with the people at the random table, or as they later explain, the pity invite people who should have RSVP'd "no." There's the unhappy married couple who sort of know the bride's father (Lisa Kudrow and Craig Robinson), the old undervalued nanny (June Squibb), the estranged family member who's had some trouble with the law (Stephen Merchant), the awkward teenager who's hoping to meet a girl (Tony Revolori), and, Eloise (Anna Kendrick), who gave up her maid of honor duties when the bride's brother, Teddy (Wyatt Russell), dumped her by text a few months prior to the wedding.

How fun it might have been if these misfits had a modicum of comedic chemistry with one another, or actually seemed like real humans. Instead, they're all half-baked "types" as though they'd all just been tasked with executing a lame audience-suggested improv exercise right before the cameras started rolling. You know you're in trouble when there are basically two running gags, one about Kudrow's character being in the same outfit as the waiters at the wedding, and the other being that Merchant's character, in an attempt to hide his convict status, can only manage to say "I'm a successful businessman." Both sour with repetition.

Life advice

It's all incredibly strained. The script infuriatingly withholds key character information. Threads are left pointlessly dangling (like the mysterious, handsome man who shows up to give Kendrick's character cryptic life advice, dance with her and then disappears). There's an elaborate "Mean Girls"-esque ecosystem of wedding guests charted out at the beginning ("eligible singles," "iffy singles," etc) that goes nowhere. And then things really take a turn for the worse when the movie starts throwing everyone's terribly oversimplified Big Life Problems at the plot expecting the audience to care.



This image released by Fox Searchlight Pictures shows, from left, Lisa Kudrow, Craig Robinson, June Squibb, Stephen Merchant, Anna Kendrick and Tony Revolori in a scene from the film, 'Table 19.' — AP

Kendrick manages to skirt by somewhat on charisma and her ability to make even the most unnatural scripts work for her, but there's only so much she can do, especially when she barely has anyone to play against in Teddy. Robinson is essentially sleepwalking and Kudrow somehow barely even registers. The only real comedic highlight is compliments of Andy Daly, a guest at another table, who has about three minutes of screen time. That a low concept rom-com didn't quite work is no great offense, but more of a headscratcher when so many talented people are involved. The story itself came from Mark and Jay Duplass, who I can only hope merely sold the idea and weren't in fact involved in its execution.

Perhaps it rests with the director, Jeffrey Blitz, Oscar-nominated for the documentary "Spellbound," who has successfully directed television comedies, including "The Office." The crucial problem with "Table 19" is that you never fall for the misfits, or fall for them falling for each other. They remain, even after a brisk 87 minutes, those annoying strangers who you can't wait to never see again. "Table 19," a Fox Searchlight Pictures release, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America for "thematic elements, sexual content, drug use, language and some brief nudity." Running time: 87 minutes. One half star out of four. — AP