Moralistic but charming teen flick draws in wider audience

KATINA VANGOPOLOS

THE allure of mystery is especially inviting for teenagers, with the unknowns of adult life and the greater world waiting to be explored. Many of these mysteries revolve around love and the risk of opening yourself up to loyalty or heartbreak for the first time.

Margo (model Cara Delevingne) is the ultimate mystery to Quentin (Nat Wolff). His girl-next-door love was his best friend as a child but in senior year they find themselves in polar opposite worlds. She is an alternative queen bee, destined to become prom queen, he is an academic with little confidence in his own happiness.

When Quentin tells you Margo loves mystery so much she wants to be one, he’s not wrong. After a night where she pulls him into her world, she disappears into thin air. Not short-term, like her parents seem to think, but with every intention of staying away.

Quentin’s encouragement from his encounter with Margo leads him on a road towards what he thinks is true love.

As in all teen novel adaptations, there’s a far bigger story at hand.

John Green’s second film adaptation following 2014’s The Fault In Our Stars explores multiple aspects of senior year, juxtaposing lighthearted issues with the greater task Quentin faces in finding Margo.

Friends Ben (Austin Abrams) and Radar (Justice Smith) are concerned about the prom while Margo’s best friend Lacey (Halston Sage) tries to make people see past her looks.

It might all sound very high school, but the direction from Jake Schreier is charming. While there are definitely moments exploiting teen genre stereotypes, Schreier knows when to unleash teen immaturity and when to rein it in.

The script from writer-producers Scott Neustadter and Michael Weber brings a varied mix of likable characters to create a feel-good story about self-discovery, for if a mystery cannot be solved, there is always something to learn along the way.

This feel-good film does carry a moral message to resonate with its target audience, but with such an engaging way of telling it, resistance is futile.

There can be great power in trying to empower others, and through the story’s strong characters that concept is embraced.

In her first major film role Delevingne plays it cool as Margo, the character’s mystery suiting her style.

Abrams as Ben, the optimistic but has-no-clue friend, is the comic glue and a great paradox to Smith’s sensibility as Radar.

When there’s a mystery it’s hard to look away, and Paper Towns explores what does and doesn’t exist in the minds of teens, with nothing fake detracting. Moralistic yes, but thoroughly entertaining.

PAPER TOWNS (M)

Starring: Cara Delevingne, Nat Wolff, Halston Sage, Austin Abrams

Where does Margo go?