

Love and loss in a gay brief encounter

Could this be the best relationship film ever — and not just a gay one, asks **Tim Teeman**

There's a special pleasure in seeing a film such as *Weekend* conquer big, bad New York. In its opening weekend there were queues around the block at the IFC Cinema, the only screen where it was showing at first, to watch a film about two gay guys who meet in a club in Nottingham and then, with time against them as one of them prepares for a new life abroad, have 48 hours in which to make out, argue, make up, do drugs, talk about everything and nothing and then face the prospect of being separated. It's been called "the gay *Before Sunrise*", but its enchanting spell is a thousand times more complex.

They may not have immediately recognised the English provincial setting — I heard a guy say, "I didn't get their accents" — but the charm of the film, its candour, its nervy romance, its characters speaking in a way gay characters never speak on film, won American audiences over.

Andrew Haigh has written, directed and edited one of the best gay-themed films yet, and possibly one of the finest films about relationships — gay or straight — in recent years.

Russell (Tom Cullen) is a lifeguard, Glen (Chris New) an artist. Neither is glamorous, neither is one kind of gay or another. Superficially Glen seems the more "out": when he wakes the morning after the two men first have sex, he starts taping Russell talking about it for a project he is doing.

Russell seems more stolid, he is kind of out, kind of not. He watches two gay men at the pool he works at acting like any other couple as an outsider might. But it turns out his close friends do know he's gay, others don't, and one of the great things about the film is how his closest male friend, without any tub-thumping or heroics, gently encourages him to go to the railway



Out and about: Tom Cullen, left, as Russell and Chris New as Glen in *Weekend*, a British film that redefines the gay movie

station as Glen prepares to leave the UK to go to America to study.

This moment Glen sardonically likens to the couple's "Notting Hill moment"; and one of the ironies of the film is that it makes you cry, yearn and root for the couple as much as any Hollywood romance with lush orchestra and Julia Roberts in doe-eyed mode. But it tugs at you subtly.

One recurring shot has Glen leaving Russell's flat and looking up at the windows of the high-rise trying to figure out which one is Russell's. Another scene has Glen gently impersonating Russell's dad — whom Russell never knew — to give Russell the chance finally to come out to him. The men's fast intimacy challenges them and us: how quickly can love take root; how much can we ever know each other?

Glen has his own insecurities about friendship, art and gay visibility, and it is Russell who spiritedly defends the radicalism of gay marriage: nothing about the duo is fixed and Haigh suggests gay men, their politics, desires and identities, are much more fluid than traditional TV and film would have us believe.

The sex in the film is sexy, but not gratuitous; it's as naturalistic and convincing as everything else — including the denouement. *Brief Encounter*, you realise, only scratched the surface of how to ratchet up the emotional punch of a railway-station goodbye, its power underlining why *Weekend* redraws the boundary of a "gay film".

Weekend is released on Nov 4