

Movie Review: 'Love in the Time of Cholera'

by David_Elliott

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "Love in the Time of Cholera" is a hugely esteemed novel in the line of Latin magical realism that is his specialty. As your imagination curls inside its lush tendrils of prose, sensual pleasure (as in sex) pushes away an urge to think: This is ridiculous.

'LOVE IN THE TIME OF CHOLERA' - The young Florentino (Unax Ugaide) finds enchantment with Fermina (Giovanna Mezzogiorno) before Javier Bardem assumes his role in 'Love in the Time of Cholera.' CNS Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) The naughty impulse gets a big, helping hand from Mike Newell's film version. Here is a \$50 million movie, shot in the author's native Colombia, that asks us to accept the Spanish potency totem Javier Bardem as timid, mom-led Florentino Ariza, a hunched shy-guy who improbably rises to head a riverboat company while bedding 622 women to slake his "virginal" crush on the woman who rejected him, Fermina (Giovanna Mezzogiorno).

Surely that figure should be enough, in old Colombia, to make him a hero. But even the satisfied women don't spread the news. Near the end, a character even floats the rumor that Ariza is a secret pedophile.

Bardem has heavily made-up fun and Ariza's obsessive desire for the briefly roused, then dismissive (for 51 years!) Fermina is neurotically touching and amusing.

But director Newell and adapter Ronald Harwood have bigger aims than comedy. What could have been a raffish farce does have nudity, but the bawdiness is cramped by florid testaments of love, glorious tropical vistas that suggest an epic canvas of destiny, and shivers of cholera (which also represents the fevers of love).

Bardem, though slenderized and made nerdy, is still quietly sexy. But the lady of his fervor is the pretty, distant and weakly expressive Mezzogiorno. She calls him a ghost and a shadow, but she's the vanishing act (except, of course, in his lastingly adolescent dream that even 622 females couldn't change).

Benjamin Bratt is splendidly moustached and suited as the doctor whom she marries, yet even his starchy dignity turns comical. On the wedding night, the gleam in his eye is worthy of Cheech Marin as he coos, "This is just the first lesson in love." John Leguizamo, Liev Schreiber and Hector Elizondo also relish their quirks and costumes.

The film wears its pedigree like a plume. Garcia Marquez even prompted Latin pop star Shakira to provide some songs. But only a movie of very subtle skill will not tip the scale of magical realism toward realism, and the densely realistic trappings of Cartagena and the river scenes, shot in depth by Affonso Beato, overwhelm any tendencies toward poetry.

What is missing is the novel, its strange time shifts and lusciously compiled details and playful, god-like viewpoint. There is no denying that the book is art. Books so very literary, filling up our mental screens as we read them, don't really need movies.

An IFC Films release. Director: Mike Newell. Writer: Ronald Harwood from novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Cast: Javier Bardem, Benjamin Bratt, Giovanna Mezzogiorno, Liev Schreiber, John Leguizamo. Running time: 1 hour, 52 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

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