

by Kimberly_Gadette

Movie Review of "STRANGER THAN FICTION"

"Stranger Than Fiction," a film that filters the challenge of literary invention through the mathematical process, is wonderfully strange indeed. The equation (math plus fiction) and the ensuing answer (equals a perfect solution) borders on creative genius. Add to this equation some marvelous comedy, a spirit that soars as high as the Eiffel Tower, and a heart that's buried deep below the surface of an OCD IRS taxman – and the positive results are innumerable. "Stranger than Fiction" – go to the head of the class.

Will Ferrel stars in "Stranger Than Fiction" The taxman (Will Ferrell) is introduced to us by his author/narrator/nemesis/murderer as follows: "Harold Crick was a man of infinite numbers, endless calculations and remarkably few words." Harold is also doubling as a character in a novel currently being written by Kay Eiffel (Emma Thompson), a tortured soul who is just as blocked as Harold. How we learn to embrace the life of our lives before it is too late is the backbone, the spine as it were, of this literally novel film.

Emma Thompson is one of the smartest actresses in cinema today. Ergo, it makes perfectly logical sense that she would have chosen this incredibly smart, sly film as an answer to her unquestionable talent. As a slightly suicidal, keyed-up author in search of her character as well as herself, she pounds on a ratty IBM Selectric in even rattier pajamas, taking a few puffs on old cigarettes before spitting out the lit ends and saving the stubs. Upon a trip to the emergency hospital in order to research death firsthand, a nurse asks Eiffel if she herself is suffering from some sickness. "Just writer's block," Eiffel blithely responds.

Though we expect high marks from Ms. Thompson, the revelation in this movie is Will Ferrell. In media interviews, the filmmakers alluded to their surprise that Ferrell would be interested in taking on a character that was such a departure from his previous work. Again, this film is sly, taking an iconic personality known to be somewhat vapid, and then alchemizing that persona into gold. Director Forster and screenwriter Helm take a flat two-dimensional being, Harold Crick (so dull that he pours over calculator catalogs on his break), and expand his mental and emotional geometry into a 3-D, Escher-esque rendering of a man who can feel, and even love, deeply. What a clever invention on all counts.

Yet the two main characters need their appropriate complements. For Harold, it is Maggie Gyllenhaal's fiery Ana Pascal who melts his heart faster than the hot chocolate chips embedded in her fresh-baked cookies. For Kay, it is Queen Latifah's Penny Escher who calms the novelist's agitated state, ultimately centering her. It's teeter meets totter, yin plus yang, creating a well-calibrated balance for the growth and rhythm of the characters in part, and the film in whole.

Add in one delightful Dustin Hoffman who serves as the center, or literary fulcrum, bridging the gap between Harold and Kay, and the comedy is complete. As literary theorist Professor Jules Hilbert, he applies the theory called Proof of Contradiction, a deductive reasoning process that he hopes will help Harold discover who is

literally pulling his strings. E.g., he asks Harold if he's witnessed any large horses. Since he hasn't, Hilbert can then rule out Greek and Roman mythologically-themed works. It's clever. With all of the main characters' last names inspired by actual mathematicians, artists and/or scientists, it's even more clever. Even better, it's also very funny.

The hardest fact to grasp was that "Stranger Than Fiction" is Zach Helm's screenwriting debut. Such a brilliantly-acted, well-directed, especially wonderfully-written movie is the brainchild of a newbie? Go figure.

Grading this movie on the curve of the Deschutes River: A-minus

Kimberly Gadette may be reached at gadettek@yahoo.com.

Production Credits: "Stranger Than Fiction" Directed by: Marc Forster Written by: Zach Helm Cast: Emma Thompson, Will Ferrell, Dustin Hoffman, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Queen Latifah Rated: PG-13 Running Time: 105 minutes Grade: A-minus

The Screen Savor: "Writer's Block Party"™ by Kimberly_Gadette