Movie Review: 'Cassandra's Dream'

by David_Elliott

Getting out of New York has been rejuvenating for Woody Allen, who turned 72 last month. Mr. New York Movies (he still inches Scorsese out of the title) had been filming too many trite, papery footnotes to his career; then, working in Britain toned him up.

'CASSANDRA'S DREAM' - Talk over drinks leads to murky waters for plotters (from left) Tom Wilkinson, Ewan McGregor and Colin Farrell in the thriller 'Cassandra's Dream.' CNS Photo courtesy of Keith Hamshere. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) There was the crafty "Match Point" (2005), the intriguing but iffy "Scoop" (2006), and now the crispest of the English trio, "Cassandra's Dream." Adroitly written by Allen without strumming for laughs, shot with pellucid sharpness in fine locations by Vilmos Zsigmond, pepped by the almost Vivaldian score of Philip Glass, this is tight entertainment.

It lacks the usual Allen zingers, though quite a few lines pull a wry undertow. This is British insinuation, not Manhattan gotcha. And the theme, as old as murder itself, is dark.

Colin Farrell and Ewan McGregor do some of their finest work to date as lower-middle-class London brothers, Ian (McGregor) and Terry (Farrell). Ian is sick of working in his aging dad's tired restaurant, while garage mechanic Terry has an adorable girlfriend (Sally Hawkins), but is more preoccupied with his gambling habit and pub prowling.

Eager to swing free, the boys feel the old English itch for open water. Though financially strapped, they buy a small sailing vessel, the Cassandra's Dream. Hey, maybe Terry will win at cards, or Uncle Howard, the brother on whom their mom still dotes, will toss some more loot from his gilded plastic surgery practice in California.

Howard is their far-flung Santa, living a high life to the embitterment of the brothers' dad (finely grumpy John Benfield). Howard arrives in London, spreads a good tab, then pinches the boys for a special favor: Would they mind getting their grasping hands dirtier, for his dear sake?

As Howard, Tom Wilkinson so occupies his rather small role that he almost brims right over the good cast. His fierce energy, and the silky but then jarring way he calls in his markers, is a master class in acting. And bad living.

Allen clips it right along, tucking in the nuances of tension (he probably brushed up on his Hitchcock DVDs). There is the flavoring of Ian's new girlfriend, gorgeous actress Angela (Hayley Atwell), who herself fakes some high posh and is amused by Ian's fumbles in suavity ("You're so charmingly awkward with my friends," she purrs, cattishly).

Almost everyone is on the make or wants to be. Ian and Terry could almost be the delayed offspring of Michael Caine in "Alfie" (1966). Ian got most of Alfie's grabber energy and dubious rake's progress; Terry is the scruff-along with fussy vapors of morality trailing his bad habits.

The film builds expertly to its key action, which is done almost glancingly. Then, it sags a little, as the siblings suffer ethical hangovers. It becomes rather pitiful, with vaguely pedantic echoes of "Crime and Punishment."

The pace and acting don't flag at all, yet you may guess the prim resolution. The last half hour feels pegged as a lesson. The main fact is that Allen's talent has its sailing flag raised, and it snaps brightly in the British air.

An IFC Films release. Director, writer: Woody Allen. Cast: Ewan McGregor, Colin Farrell, Tom Wilkinson, Phil Davis, Sally Hawkins, Hayley Atwell. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated PG-13. 3 stars.

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