Movie Review: 'Moscow, Belgium': Love's complications

by David L. Coddon

From the cinematic archives, a few words of wisdom: In the Hitchcock classic "Rear Window," Thelma Ritter (playing an insurance nurse) asserts, "When a man and woman see each other, and like each other, they should come together â€” wham!, like two taxis on Broadway."

RATINGS GUIDE:

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) It's a wham!, not on Broadway but in the working-class neighborhood of Moscou in Belgium, that brings 41-year-old Matty and 29-year-old Johnny together in director Christophe van Rompaey's promising debut film, "Moscow, Belgium." Matty (Barbara Sarafian) and Johnny (Jurgen Delnaet) don't see and like each other at first: Their collision (she backs her car into his semi-truck) in a supermarket parking lot precipitates no-holds-barred shouting, insults and cursing, with Matty, a hard-working mother of three with a philandering skunk of a husband, giving as good as she gets.

But as in many love stories, the initial animus between worn, world-weary Matty and Johnny (a shaggy-haired trucker who resembles a Viking after a binge) doesn't last. Simultaneously aroused and impressed by the stalwart older woman, Johnny quickly pursues her: first with a phone call (he copped the number off the police accident report), then by showing up in person to repair the damaged trunk of her car. Before we're scarcely warm in our theater seats, Johnny and Matty are heating up the cab of his truck.

Complications, of course, are rampant, with the 12-year age difference between the two being the least of them: Johnny is a recovering alcoholic who's been behind bars three times, most recently for beating up his brazenly cheating spouse (now ex-spouse); and Matty's mate, Werner (Johan Heldenbergh), is stepping out with the never-seen Gail, yet when he finds out that his wife has a beau of her own, he suddenly decides he wants his marriage after all. As for the kids, Matty tells a co-worker: "My oldest daughter is in adolescence, my youngest daughter thinks she's in adolescence, and my son can't find his way into adolescence."

"Moscow, Belgium," then, is no run-of-the-mill May-December romance. But it's not so much the nuances of story as it is the performances of its protagonists. Sarafian projects a strength to survive and steeliness even in her character's loneliness. Heldenbergh's Johnny is weak but well-meaning and hard to dislike (especially when stacked up against Matty's smug, unfaithful hubby).

Screenwriter Jean-Claude van Rijckeghem lightens the proceedings with a reasonable number of funny moments (notably in scenes at the post office where Matty works), though he can't resist a couple of cliche bits (quips from wise-beyond-their-years kids, and a crooning karaoke solo at a bar from Johnny). At least he resists sugarcoating the relationship between Matty and Johnny. Though starved for attention and a woman of passion, Matty never loses her grip on reality. She just yearns for her reality to be happier.

Who can blame her there?

"Moscow, Belgium." Rated: Not rated (in French, with English subtitles). Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes. 3 stars.

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