

A reader comments on Notting Hill

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Since I see movies so infrequently, I thought I could give you a capsule review of one I just saw—*Notting Hill*. I saw it due to a misconception. I thought it was about life in this gritty neighborhood in London—something I would have found interesting. It is instead a kind of Cinderella story where the prince (the Julia Roberts character) comes from her castle in Beverly Hills and takes the suffering son from the dirt (the Hugh Grant character) and transforms him into royalty.

This movie was so bad that I was actually sitting there embarrassed at watching this idiocy—embarrassed for all the people involved in its production, particularly Julia Roberts who is a fine actress. Why does she have to work in trash like this?

I'm not saying that a retelling of the Cinderella story cannot be done well. But we had a movie here with paper cutouts instead of real characters. Grant falls in love with Roberts for no discernible reason other than her celebrity aura, which hangs about her person like some second skin. The movie is a total send-up of the celebrity cult—which I thought at first was perhaps being satirized à la Woody Allen. No such luck. This is a completely naive celebration of celebrity and the empty culture of which it is part. There are lots of shots of frenzied reporters tripping over themselves to get a word from this “extraordinary human being.” The “humanizing touch” is supposedly that the goddess cannot find happiness among her own and is inwardly “just a young girl looking for someone to love her.”

Clichés on top of clichés. Did I forget to mention the awful background music—songs about finding love in the most unexpected places, just to drive home the point. The humanizing effect of Roberts's affair with Grant is supposed to be conveyed by the fact that she stops playing roles in adventure and space movies, and starts acting in “serious” movies based on Henry James period novels. The problem here is that the movie never breaks out of the assumptions behind the celebrity cult,

even though on a certain level it tries to portray it as shallow and superficial. The guiding philosophy seems to be that you can do “meaningful” work and still remain part of the studio celebrity machine.

The supporting characters are formulaic stick figures from central casting—the wacky sister, the vulgar roommate, the ex-lover now turned best friend, etc., etc. There are a few good one-liners here and there, but that is to be expected from a multimillion-dollar production. In short, this is the kind of movie I usually see on airline flights across the Atlantic, without the headsets. There is no need to listen to the dialogue as you can pretty well figure out what's going on in such a movie by looking up from a semi-conscious stupor every 10 minutes or so. But unlike those airline movies which are free and can mostly be ignored, I actually shelled out \$8.50 for this stinker. The only good thing I can say about it is that there were some interesting shots of the Notting Hill area with its street vendors, etc. Unfortunately, this was just a colorful background for the action and played no real role in the movie. Too bad.

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