

Review – Last Chance Harvey – Littleham Village Hall

Saturday 6th February 2010

I was persuaded to see this film, mainly as a result of my admiration of Emma Thompson, who I consider to be one of the most convincing actors of the last couple of decades. Whenever I have seen her, I have found her portrayals completely convincing and always so fresh and natural. Her role as an airport market research agent, Kate Walker, in “Last Chance Harvey” was no exception. Indeed, I think her co-actor, Dustin Hoffman, himself no slouch, actually struggled to match her very creditable performance.

The unexceptional story revolved around the frenetic life of an American divorcee, Dustin Hoffman’s character, Harvey Shine. As a musician now past his prime, he reluctantly earns his living composing jingles for the TV advertising industry. In this he is clearly frustrated, preferring to be creative in a rather different musical genre, Jazz. The viewer concludes that he has either taken the soft option where the money is certain or that he simply hasn’t the initiative and courage to mould his life’s path to his own liking.

Pressures upon him would appear to have been the maintenance of his daughter who we learn he has seen little of during her formative years since the divorce. He appears to regret this and when her wedding to a successful businessman takes place in London he makes the effort and travels to the UK to attend. It would seem that, perhaps due to his frenetic lifestyle, his daughter or her mother (formerly his wife) do not suspect that he might be there. His trip must not extend to more than two days as he is being pressed to return home to the US from the wedding for an important meeting with a client organised by his agent. The competing priorities for his attention are the source of the fascination that this story evokes in the viewer, both in terms of Harvey’s work life and private life as we discover as the film unfolds.

On arrival in the UK, somewhat dishevelled and disorganised, Harvey is intercepted by Emma Thompson as the Market Researcher Kate Walker. She is the first to receive a hint of the tautness of Hoffman’s characterisation, when he rebuffs her. Later that day, the pair quite innocently use the same taxi. This simple scene was as convincing an example of the idea of “...ships that pass in the night” as I think I have ever seen and is a credit to the director and cameraman. We are given a view of the rear of a London taxi as it pulls up in the centre of a London street. As Harvey alights from the left hand side, Kate gets in from the right. Neither being aware of the other. Very deft and clever.

As the film progresses, due to a couple of serendipitous meetings, Kate is persuaded by Harvey to a date. From this point on we follow the pair as they each confront their fears and doubts about the developing relationship. To begin with, Kate in particular, energetically resists getting involved but becomes quietly more interested as she progressively perceives that in Harvey she may have found her love.

Harvey on the other hand is quietly persistent, seemingly driven by his more sensitive alter self that we see slowly emerging from the unnatural workaholic that he has become.

There is an amusing parallel sub plot surrounding Kate's mother, delightfully played by Eileen Atkins. An elderly woman, living on her own, and although it is not explained why, appears to be dependent upon her daughter. Kate receives several 'phone calls a day from her, the content of which is never entirely revealed but leaves the observer with an impression that the mother suffers from some kind of paranoia. This is no better exemplified than in her preoccupation with the activities of newly arrived neighbours, They are apparently immigrants and this status has clearly inflamed the mothers paranoid condition. She watches them enthusiastically and the sight of one of them carrying a large bag of bodily proportions into a garden shed pushes her to the limit when she can no longer resist engaging her daughter's assistance. Of course this all blows up at the time when Kate is about to seal her commitment to the new relationship with Harvey. However, the ghost is laid when the neighbour brings around a smoked ham as a gift and it becomes clear that the item being carried into the shed was a pig's carcass where it was subsequently butchered and smoked.

As the film progresses there are a few bitter sweet moments. For example after a tryst in the grounds of a large city mansion, I think it might have been Somerset House, a further date is agreed when it seems both parties would make a commitment to the relationship. Kate, impatiently awaits Harvey's arrival and eventually gives up both the meeting and the relationship when Harvey fails to turn up. She sees Harvey's "no show" as no more than a confirmation of all that she believes of men but perhaps more honestly, what she believes of herself; her inadequacy. She is quite unaware that Harvey has become a reluctant patient in hospital after becoming ill through failing to take his medication – he left it behind in the US – another symptom of his excessively busy life style. After recovering and discharging himself from hospital, Harvey pursues Kate and eventually catches up with her at her writing class. Here we meet another humorous diversion where we witness an octogenarian whose novel, which he is reading to an increasingly uncomfortable group, describes in lascivious language the sexual exploits of his hero.

Harvey then has the uncomfortable and difficult task of convincing a most suspicious and doubtful Kate of his predicament that prevented meeting her as planned. Eventually, he succeeds and rather unrealistically to my mind, she agrees to attend his daughter's wedding as Harvey's partner.

They arrive late at the wedding breakfast and are embarrassed to be placed at the children's table, the only place where there is space. Harvey's discomfort is further exacerbated as he faces the prospect of his daughter's stepfather giving the speech that is normally the province of the bride's father. His emotional torment is palpable as, eventually, his alter self emerges and he stumbles to his feet and interrupts the step father as he is about to begin, seizing his rightful place by making a brief but emotional speech. This was the second dramatic move that he had made in the furtherance of his own unarticulated but now very evident, commitment to take charge of his life (the first was his determination to pursue Kate), now there is a third that brings the film to its climax.

Harvey rejects the pleas of his agent to return to the US where it would appear a lucrative deal for the production of commercial jingles is his for the taking. Instead he determines to stay and to make his way in life with Kate. This commitment is sealed when he serenades her on a piano conveniently discovered in an anteroom to the wedding reception. I thought this rather too contrived but the music was good.

No one could be offended by this film, unless, perhaps they found the octogenarian novelist's enthusiasm for his topic slightly disturbing. Similarly, I can believe that many may find it bland and unexciting. The plethora of loud, special effect ridden films that compete for our attention these days, inevitably make a film like this appear uninspiring. Nevertheless, it is a story well told, well acted and well worth the watching. I believe I might see it again. But then of course, I have an ulterior motive. Emma Thompson is quite the most attractive actress on the British film screen for years.

Sir Lorn Stakes - Littleham, 24th February 2010