

Hologram for the King: EW review

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Some novels seem to naturally lend themselves to movie adaptations. Others don't. Dave Eggers' 2012 existentially absurd midlife crisis tale *A Hologram for the King* is one of the latter. It's a story about an American consultant with a shattered marriage and a slightly estranged daughter who finds himself halfway around the world in Saudi Arabia trying to dazzle the desert country's monarch on a mirage-like piece of technology. But when he gets there, the king keeps delaying their meeting over and over. It's like *Waiting for Godot* by the Red Sea. Eggers' book is largely interior. Its conflict is one of the soul. Again, not an easy movie to pull off.

The good news is that in adapting Eggers' novel (which I, frankly, am lukewarm on), writer-director Tom Tykwer (*Run Lola Run*) was smart enough to cast Tom Hanks in the lead role. He gives an otherwise downbeat story some sorely needed levity. After all, if anyone can deftly juggle light and heavy, humor and dread, introspection and extroversion, it's him. He's also one of the few actors in his age group who I can imagine being not only game, but actually pulling off Tykwer's surreal opening sequence, where Hanks' character, Alan Clay, emerges from his suburban cul-de-sac home pantomiming the Talking Heads' nervous riff on paranoid conformity "Once in a Lifetime" ("You may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife/And you may ask yourself, Well...How did I get here?"). It shouldn't work at all, but it does.

From there, Hanks' Clay is stuck in a cramped middle seat on a very long flight to Jeddah, arriving in rough shape both physically and spiritually. It doesn't help that too much is riding on this business trip, including his ability to pay his daughter's college tuition. Alan is a stranger in a strange land, which provides the fodder for the film's best moments. He undergoes a series of humiliations while he and his team await the king, who may or may not ever arrive at the ghost-town model city in the middle of desert (a mirage within a mirage). He flirts and gets frisky with a fellow expat named Hanne (*The Duke of Burgundy*'s Sidse Babett Knudsen) at a Danish embassy party. He forms an instant Abbott-and-Costello relationship with his laid-back local driver-for-hire (newcomer Alexander Black). And he performs a bit of self-surgery on a metaphor-heavy golfball-sized lump on his back, leading him into the care of a kind-eyed Saudi doctor played by *Homeland*'s Sarita Choudhury who becomes more than just his physician.

If it sounds like *Hologram* is basically about a middle-aged white guy getting his groove back in the Middle East, well, yes, it is that. But if you squint hard enough, it's also a little bit more. With his weary, sleep-deprived eyes, looming sense of personal obsolescence, and exasperated string of dead-end questions met by run-around answers, Hanks gives Clay a dimension that the character didn't have on the page – a human dimension – that elevates an otherwise unexceptional film into something worth seeing. And while his problems may not look like your problems or mine, he still manages to earn our sympathy thanks to the actor playing him. *A Hologram for the King* may be about a man who's lost his mojo, but Hanks thankfully still possesses his. **B**

<http://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/movies/2016/04/20/tom-hanks-finds-wry-humor-hologram-for-king/aeHOHgF2HrFu94V1IfoOsN/story.html>