

Tom Hanks finds wry humor in ‘A Hologram for the King’



Helmut Prein - Alexander Black and Tom Hanks in Tom Tykwer’s “A Hologram for the King.”

By Tom Russo, Globe Correspondent April 21, 2016

At a glance, Tom Hanks’s character in “A Hologram for the King” could be a business traveler in any commercial for one of the global hotel giants. Hanks’s Alan Clay is witty and presents himself well, but he’s run down from his long flight, his foreign surroundings, and all that pressure from back at the office. Keep watching, though, and he also starts to seem like the workaday sales force equivalent of some contemporary combat-drama protagonist. Much as he’s striving to accomplish his mission, he’s going slightly mad over there in the desert — Saudi Arabia, in this case.

It’s Tom Hanks, so there’s plenty of wry humor in the surreal situations confounding already-spiraling Alan. But there’s also a palpable melancholy to his struggle to find himself again. He couldn’t have picked a worse place to be trying to get his mojo back. Or could he?

“Hologram” is adapted by filmmaker Tom Tykwer (co-director of “Cloud Atlas”) from a novel by literati fave Dave Eggers, and it feels that way right out of the gate. The movie’s abrupt, breezily cynical opening is a delirious attention-grabber that ranks with Tykwer’s 1999 breakout, “Run Lola Run.” No spoilers here, but who knew Hanks could’ve been CBGB material?

Our takeaway is that Alan is a former big shot for Schwinn whose career and personal life have gone sour, and who's desperate to sell the Saudi king on some teleconferencing technology he's now peddling. But this isn't just one more cinematic case of a savvy Westerner landing in some alien cultural backwater, ostensibly adapting but really just schooling the locals. Alan is the one playing clueless foreigner, as everyone from the king's inscrutable staffers to Alan's offbeat hired ride (entertaining American newcomer Alexander Black) seems to know the rules to a game that he's just not grasping. Picture Alan's team cooling their heels (or not) in a stifling desert tent next to a gleaming, underoccupied office building. It's like an international-relations microcosm imagined by the Coen brothers, down to an occasional sense that the absurdity isn't taking us anywhere.

Then there's the alarming lump on Alan's back, which leads him to a quietly liberated female doctor (Sarita Choudhury, "Homeland"). Their tender, empathetic interactions beyond the hospital are ultimately what help most in keeping Hanks's character, and the movie, from simply wandering the desert.

Written and directed by Tom Tykwer, based on the novel by Dave Eggers. Starring Tom Hanks, Alexander Black, Sarita Choudhury. Boston Common, Kendall Square. 97 minutes. R (some sexuality and nudity, language, and brief drug use).

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