

Tribeca Film Review: ‘A Hologram for the King’



Courtesy of Tribeca Film Festival

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Tom Hanks plays an American business adrift in Saudi Arabia in this striking but only partial realization of Dave Eggers' novel.

In “[A Hologram for the King](#),” Dave Eggers’ seriocomic lament for the American Dream, a sad-sack businessman loses himself amid the shimmering sands and empty skyscrapers of a Saudi Arabian metropolis-in-the-making — an appropriately surreal, mirage-like backdrop for a journey where failure and frustration are very much the point. But a different kind of frustration gradually takes hold in writer-director [Tom Tykwer](#)’s intriguingly offbeat film adaptation, which broadens the story’s humorous and romantic elements at the expense of its deeper, more existential qualities: Not unlike the holographic display referenced in the title, the result plays like a striking but somewhat faltering visual projection of its source material. Still, the movie does make the most of another sly, persona-tweaking performance from [Tom Hanks](#), which should do its part to boost commercial interest when Lionsgate/Roadside Attractions releases it April 22, following its [Tribeca Film Festival](#) premiere.

You at least know you’re in for something out of the ordinary from the jarring dream

sequence that opens the movie, in which Hanks' Alan Clay performs an off-note rendition of Talking Heads' "Once in a Lifetime," then winds up strapped to a rickety roller-coaster — a literal representation of the personal and professional disaster his life has become. In an economically depressed 2010, Alan hops a plane to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where he and his colleagues hope to score a big contract by presenting an elaborate holographic teleconferencing system to the king. This turns out to be easier said than done, as the film proceeds to unfold like a sort of Middle East-set "Groundhog Day" by way of "Waiting for Godot," each new morning bringing with it a fresh round of oddities and disappointments.

Depressed and jet-lagged, Alan keeps sleeping in and missing meetings that were never going to happen, anyway: The Saudi monarch is a perpetual no-show, and his deputies aren't much more reliable. Day after day, Alan shows up at the King's Metropolis of Economy and Trade, a skeleton of a city projected to see completion around 2025, where he and his team are relegated to an empty outdoor tent with no air conditioning and (worse) no Wi-Fi. Alan does find a friend in his driver, Yousef (Alexander Black), a genial goofball who, in a nod to the modern world's rapidly vanishing borders, is obsessed with American pop and once studied in Alabama. Elsewhere, a friendly Danish associate named Hanne (Sidse Babett Knudsen, "Borgen," "The Duke of Burgundy") hooks him up with a forbidden bottle of hooch and attempts to seduce him, though Alan is too lost to respond — and besides, he's more drawn to Zahra (Sarita Choudhury), the alluringly reserved Saudi doctor who treats him on more than one occasion.

Having directed a few different versions of Hanks in his portions of "Cloud Atlas" (2012), Tykwer has now set himself to the task of pinning down, and gently chipping away at, the actor's sturdy Everyman image. Versatile though Hanks may be, we are not accustomed to the sight of him lancing a giant cyst — a highly symbolic affliction that occasions a darkly funny tableau of blood and vomit. Nor, after the principled heroics of "Bridge of Spies" and "Captain Phillips," are we exactly familiar with the sight of a Hanks character enduring such a Sisyphean gauntlet of failure. In sharp, cutting flashbacks, we meet the ex-wife (Jane Perry) who can't cut him a break, as well as the kind daughter (Tracey Fairaway) who patiently forgives him for not being able to pay for her college tuition just yet. We also meet Alan's aging father (Tom Skerritt), a retired factory worker who scorns the rampant outsourcing of American jobs to places abroad like Saudi Arabia, Dubai and China.

It's in this exceedingly odd 21st-century capitalist reality in which Alan finds himself adrift — a strange land where young locals in white *keffiyeh* play video games on their iPads, European expats doff their clothes for a night of pool-party revelry, and a desolate city stands in wait for Western fast-food franchises that may never come. Working with production designer Uli Hanisch and cinematographer Frank Griebe (his camera taking in the hot, dusty expanse of the film's Moroccan and Saudi Arabian locations), Tykwer captures Alan's surroundings in all their dusty, glassy otherworldliness. And together with editor Alexander Berner, the director keeps

us reliably off balance with an arrestingly jittery formal syntax, splicing in dream and memory sequences with an often unsettling lack of warning.

Up to a point, “A Hologram for the King” beguiles and even captivates, and after the dramatic exertions of “Cloud Atlas,” it’s a relief to see Tykwer operating in a comparatively low-key, even minimalist mode. That we are watching a movie in which nothing much happens — one that deliberately turns stasis and inertia into dramatic principles — mostly feels like cause for stimulation rather than boredom, thanks in part to the characteristic intensity of Tykwer’s filmmaking style. (It also gives the movie the somewhat distanced feel of a recession-era period piece, in light of the social, economic and military unrest plaguing the Saudi Arabia of today.) For all that, however, the subtleties that Eggers achieved on the page haven’t been especially well translated: Several of Alan’s encounters with side characters have been duly lifted from the novel (leaving entire chunks of dialogue intact), but in a safe, list-checking way that often feels devoid of any clear comic or dramatic purpose.

At every step, Hanks’ warmly sympathetic, never-cloying performance acts as a bulwark against the sort of miscalculations that might have sunk a less well-anchored vehicle. The potentially eyebrow-raising castings of Choudhury (an English-Indian actress) and Black (an American newcomer) as Saudi characters rankles less, in the end, than the facile manner in which these individuals function in relation to Alan: As his love interest and his comic relief, respectively, they serve as little more than exotic balms for the Westerner’s weary soul, and no amount of delicate maneuvering on Tykwer’s part can quite repurpose them as something more substantial. There is always the danger, when dramatizing an American’s alienation in a strange land, of milking that strangeness for either easy laughs or easy remedies. “A Hologram for the King” arrives at its feel-good conclusion honestly enough, but its cultural engagement feels tentative, even secondhand: The movie conjures no shortage of potent images, but push a bit deeper and your fist closes on empty air.

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