

'Argylle' is an amusing ride with a charming cast

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: <<<

out of <<<<<<

Running Time: 139 minutes

This film from Universal Pictures and Apple Original Films will debut in theaters on Friday, Feb. 2. It will also be released on Apple TV+ at an undetermined date in the future.

Director Matthew Vaughn is no stranger to spy movies, having previously directed the excellent 2014 film *Kingsman: The Secret Service* and its, well, less-effective follow-ups. His latest is *Argylle*, another feature involving secret agents.

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While the other pictures in his previous series have always included a strong dose of humor, this effort veers even further in an over-the-top comedic course. As it turns out, it's a wise decision. While the end result isn't as potent as the original *Kingsman*, this is a boisterous and amusing ride that beats the sequels from that series.

Elly Conway (Bryce Dallas Howard) is an introverted and anxiety-prone writer, famous for her series of novels involving a fictional spy named Argylle (Henry Cavill) and his partner Wyatt (John Cena). But while traveling to visit her mother (Catherine O'Hara), the lead encounters Aidan (Sam Rockwell), a man who claims to be a real secret agent.

He states the books Elly has written are so accurate that she appears to be predicting a major world-changing event in the spy world. He also tells the author that an organization led by a sinister figure named Ritter (Bryan Cranston) is about to arrive and perhaps even kill her. Hoping to pick Elly's brain for ideas on how to stop this threat, Aidan whisks the writer and her cat away on a wild adventure. But the terrified Elly has no idea who any of these people are, and who is actually good or evil.

The movie benefits from a wonderful cast who are clearly having a great time.

Elly has a vision of what a heroic cloak-and-dagger operative should look like and the stress of the situation causes her to frequently have hilarious visions of Argylle appearing in Aidan's place during combat scenes. The actual agent is blunt and comes across, in a few respects, as less sophisticated and charming than expected, leading to plenty of opportunities for humor. Howard and Rockwell make a great team and the interplay between them is enjoyable.

Co-stars O'Hara and Cranston also stand out and make wonderful impressions in their roles. It's a hoot to see their characters develop in unique ways over the course of the story.

Another highlight is the script itself. I've seen many spy films over my lifetime. Going in cold to this feature, I expected a story in the vein of *Romancing the Stone* in which the timid protagonist finds a little bit of confidence.

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Indeed, this occurs in the film, but not necessarily in the manner anticipated. The film contains a couple of big twists that spin events off in a series of unexpected directions. This reviewer will certainly admit that, based on the first ten minutes, he would not have predicted all of the unusual turns and the climax that ultimately follows.

It's very clear that the screenplay is prioritizing humor over action thrills and when the characters square off, it can be surreal. There are eccentric set-ups, like one with a camera attached to the actors as they spin during dance numbers. It's very amusing, as are the feline POV shots through a distorted vantage point.

Admittedly, the film goes heavy on the CGI and these moments aren't the most convincing. Even that pet cat looks phony at times, but so many aggrandized things occur to it that the mostly digital creation still generates chuckles. And, the hand-to-hand fight scenes are exceptionally well-staged. The camera constantly moves with the action in fun and inventive ways.

Not every gag lands perfectly and it's a bit too long for its own good, but the movie is full of so many nutty ideas that one can't help but admire its willingness to do anything to entertain. If you're looking for a serious-minded adventure, you may be baffled by seeing a character glide across a slick floor, a shootout featuring rainbow-colored flares, various stunts involving a CGI cat, as well as a major star of the film appearing with a mullet. But, if you're at the movies to laugh and have a good time with a charming cast, *Argylle* is largely successful in delivering the goods.

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