

‘Problemista’ may divide viewers

Written by gallupsun
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Rating: 3 out of 4

Running Time: 104 minutes

This feature from A24 is opening exclusively at cinemas in major markets on Friday, March 22.

Every so often there is a comedy that divides viewers over its tone and approach. Typically, these pictures have an oddball sense of humor and are described as anything from quirky to more negatively, peculiar or twee. Problemista is one of those films. Either you'll be able to get on its wavelength and be entertained by its eccentric characters and their strange behavior, or you'll find its tone grating and difficult to endure.

It won't speak to everyone, but it did put a smile on this reviewer's face.

Alejandro (Julio Torres, who also serves as writer and director) has moved from El Salvador to New York City hoping to land an internship at Hasbro and live his dream of becoming a toy designer. As the story begins, we learn that his application has been ignored, forcing him to work at a cryogenics facility. After a very minor mishap on the job, Alejandro is fired, creating immense trouble for himself. If he cannot find a new job and sponsor in a short period, he will lose his work visa and be deported back to El Salvador.

Surprisingly, while being let go the lead encounters headstrong, erratic art critic Elizabeth (Tilda Swinton). Her husband is painter Bobby (RZA), whose terminally ill frozen body was under the care of Alejandro. The protagonist asks to help Elizabeth manage Bobby's paintings in order to get him a gallery showing and the artistic respect she feels he deserves.

Indeed, there's no shortage of bizarreness on display. Alejandro is completely innocent and timid. Despite being a grown adult, his gait as he moves around the city is almost like that of a

child. By contrast, Elizabeth is nearly unhinged, frequently getting wound up and confrontational out of the blue.

It often leads to an amusingly wide-eyed Alejandro often staring in shock as his moody associate and potential sponsor flies into rages, berating anyone in her sightline. Swinton is hysterical as Elizabeth, playing the type of individual whom anyone would be terrified to cross paths with (especially if they aren't familiar with an outdated filing system she adores).

The awkward and amusing conversations between Alejandro and Elizabeth do make up the funniest moments in the film, as the protagonist gently attempts to keep the erratic Elizabeth in check and himself in her good books in order to earn a sponsorship. And Torres is likable as Alejandro, whom over the course of the story is ultimately encouraged to be more forceful in his pursuits.

It all leads to a big laugh near the close. There are also some entertaining flashbacks between Elizabeth and Bobby, a struggling but kind-hearted artist whose work has a very specific and humorously bizarre focus.

Of course, this story is in large part about the immigrant experience. Using humor, the movie effectively goes about revealing just some of the many strange contradictions in the visa process, including the incredibly stressful and unpleasant hoops that one must jump through just to survive the ordeal. This reviewer has gone through an immigration process over his lifetime, and can confirm that while these scenes may seem over-the-top, they really aren't as exaggerated as you might think.

Admittedly, not everything in the film works. There are also a few bizarre interludes as we travel inside Alejandro's mind. These moments are visually striking, but aren't as funny as some of the lead's real-life escapades. Not every toy product in Alejandro's arsenal makes a big impression either. And a couple of other jokes begin in a very amusing fashion, but take unusual tangents and switch tones unexpectedly.

Still, the movie features a completely unique voice. And like its rough-around-the-edges characters, if you can simply accept some of their personal oddities, much of the story is funny and even sweet. Problemista is an interesting little indie feature that may change the way you

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view the immigration process (as well as poultry, oddly enough), making a lasting impression in the process.

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