

‘Love in the Villa’ is a misstep for writer/director Mark Steven Johnson

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 09 September 2022 02:44



Rating: «

out of «««««

Running Time:
114 minutes

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This movie was released globally on Netflix on September 1.

Admittedly, I’m not the target audience for “Love in the Villa,” a frothy romance feature that could have just as easily debuted on the Hallmark Channel as it has on Netflix. However, this week marks a slower period for entertainment options. And I was intrigued by the talent behind the camera on this project.

“Love in the Villa” was written and directed by Mark Steven Johnson, whose previous credits include “Daredevil” (2003) and “Ghost Rider” (2007). He also wrote the story for “Christopher

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Robin” (2018), a recent title that I greatly admired.

Frankly, it’s initially difficult to tell if this picture was intended as a parody of a Hallmark title. But if it is, it isn’t an effective one and doesn’t even deliver as a straight-forward rom-com.

Julie (Kat Graham) is a primary school teacher, hopeless romantic and meticulous planner who has long-planned a trip to Verona, Italy with boyfriend Brandon (Raymond Ablack) to the area where the Shakespearian play “Romeo and Juliet” is set. She expects her significant other will propose to her during the stay, but is shocked when he backs out of the trip and ends their relationship.

After a terrible flight, she arrives and discovers that the owner has double-booked the villa. It seems she has to share the site for a week with stuffy British wine importer Charlie (Tom Hopper) who is attending a conference in the city. The two butt heads immediately, but as the days pass the pair begin to develop feelings for each other.

All of the performers, from the leads to the supporting cast of locals are directed to act in an over-the-top manner. It’s so exaggerated early on that one’s expectations initially change to expect a much sillier film. Even still, the story puts its characters in preposterous situations that strain all credibility.

Much of the first third of the film features the leads trying to sabotage one another. The conflict is ignited when Julie has a telephone conversation with a friend who encourages her to be assertive and forcibly make Charlie leave. This is completely pointless and unnecessary, as the two already know there are no vacant rooms in the city for the evicted party to go. Yet, elaborate, nasty and sometimes life-threatening pranks are pulled.

None of these bits are very funny and some even come across as mean-spirited.

Somehow, the film seemingly wants us to think of this as playful flirting. And then, just as suddenly and beyond all reason, the protagonists begin sharing stories of heartache and quickly fall for one another. It feels completely forced and false, especially after all that has preceded

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this change.

And, even odder, when Julie and Charlie finally do start appreciating each other and attempt to provide assistance, it still goes sideways and results in serious problems (although the pair don't seem to care what happens to their professional careers by this point).

So, are there any positives? Well, the movie was largely shot in Verona, Italy and makes for a gorgeous travelog. The city and winery locations are lovely and cinematography very polished.

And there is a funny moment or two. Most involve the reactions of servers as terrible events are befalling the main characters. Additionally, a couple of off-the-cuff comments from Charlie do earn a chuckle, including a scene in which he suggests that an inspirational quote sounds like a tagline from a popular movie.

The pair do their best to provide some sparks and a bit of life is generated towards the close with an unexpected arrival or two, but all the romance has long since fizzled by this point.

This reviewer isn't an enthusiast of Hallmark Channel movies, but at least they have the good sense to move at a tight clip and wrap things up in a timely manner. This picture ultimately drags on for nearly two hours before reaching its inevitable conclusion. And oddly enough, the filmmakers don't even bother to detail the next steps for some of the characters or where their paths will take them.

It's a misstep for the writer/director and one hopes that he avoids this genre in the future. Even on Netflix, "Love in the Villa" may not be worth the rental.

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