

‘Amsterdam’ may not be for everyone

Written by Glenn Kay

Monday, 31 October 2022 18:46

Rating: 3 out of 4

Running Time: 134 minutes

This feature from 20th Century Studios opened in theaters on Oct. 7.

Filmmaker David O. Russell (“I Heart Huckabees,” “Silver Linings Playbook,” “American Hustle,” “Joy”) has a reputation for creating memorable, if occasionally shaggy films featuring eccentric protagonists and large ensemble casts. After spending seven years away from the director’s chair, he has returned with “Amsterdam,” a star-studded period comedy/mystery/thriller.

But those terms don’t quite sum this movie up. Like other titles from Russell, the movie is its own strange amalgam with its own unique tone. The characters are odd and the story strays onto various tangents. It will frustrate many, but those willing to accept the moviemaker’s idiosyncrasies will find it to be an intriguing and fascinating tale.

Dr. Bert Berendsen (Christian Bale) is a World War I veteran who works creating body prosthetics and trying to mend fences with his estranged wife, Beatrice Vandenheuvell (Andrea Riseborough). After accepting a request for help from fellow unit member and attorney Harold Woodman (John David Washington), Berendsen is introduced to the daughter (Taylor Swift) of the two men’s deceased general, Bill Meekins (Ed Begley Jr.). She believes her father was killed and soon after Berendsen and Woodman are framed for murder.

As they evade authorities and try to make sense of the situation, Woodman reunites with old flame Valerie Voze (Margot Robbie) and is introduced to her relatives Libby (Anya Taylor-Joy) and Tom Voze (Rami Malek). The protagonists also encounter the famed General Gil Dillenbeck (Robert De Niro), as well as enigmatic government agents and ornithology enthusiasts Henry Norcross (Michael Shannon) and Paul Canterbury (Mike Myers).

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Believe it or not, there are even more threads and characters to keep in check as the story unfolds. One thing that viewers must immediately become used to is the fact that many of the people involved have a history. In order to deliver the necessary details, the film continually jumps around from the central events taking place in 1933 to flashbacks set before and after the Great War. It's an awful lot to take in.

The protagonists have to deal with a potential conspiracy and personal concerns (Berendsen is convinced that his in-laws, and maybe even his wife, wanted him to die while in service), as well as physical aftereffects and trauma caused by military service.

There is an unfortunate side-effect to having an overstuffed script with so many time-lapses, characters and themes. The film is even edited in a strange manner, with a few jarring cuts appearing even during simple dialogue scenes. Still, one could argue that the oft-kilter feeling may be an attempt by the filmmaker to mirror the frenzied mindset of the leads.

No matter what the intent, at least the actors are all at the top of their game, playing every moment for maximum comedic or dramatic effect. Truth be told, most of the film plays out in a darkly comic manner and it works. Bale manages to make his bizarre character quite endearing, often struggling with a glass eye that falls out at inopportune moments.

The mystery itself is also quite interesting. As noted in the opening credits, the story is more accurate than one might initially believe and it's encouraging to see this tale address these issues. There are sinister motivations and acts on the part of the villains that are reminiscent of today, some 90 years after this feature.

And on a technical level, everything looks phenomenal. The sets and costumes are impressive, as is the gorgeous cinematography by Emmanuel Lubezki ("Sleepy Hollow," "The Tree of Life," "Gravity," "Birdman," "The Revenant"). Even if the narrative doesn't speak to every viewer, there is little criticism that can be directed at the visuals, which convincingly transport the viewer back to the 1930s.

At times, the movie's story feels unfocused and the editing is perplexing at times, but somehow it still keeps this viewer engaged. And since the performers are so charismatic, the jumpy approach actually adds a hint of unpredictability and uniqueness to the proceedings.

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“Amsterdam” may require a lot of work on the part of the viewer, but it is a complex and transfixing bit of strangeness that is compelling from beginning to end.

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