

'The Space Between Us' launches into silly teenage-romance orbit

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «« out 4 stars

Running Time: 121 min.

I think it's fairly safe to say that I'm really not the target demographic for a teen romance feature. Still, one can see how a love story spanning incredible distance might succeed and create a lot of drama if done properly.

Unfortunately, *The Space Between Us* is a long and lumbering effort that can't quite get a handle on its tone, juggling some disparate elements in an awkward fashion. It may work well enough for youngsters, but most adults will find themselves rolling their eyes.

The bulk of the story deals with 16-year-old Gardiner (Asa Butterfield), the first person ever born on Mars. It's an unexpected pregnancy (NASA must have seriously messed up some pre-flight astronaut tests), resulting in a child that project head Nathaniel Shepherd (Gary Oldman) doesn't want to admit exists.

Raised by scientists in a Martian base, he grows up to be a teenage genius. Thanks to some incredible technology that has presumably arrived by the year 2034, he's able to live-chat online with an alienated high school student on Earth named Tulsa (Britt Robertson). Despite serious health concerns, Gardiner becomes desperate to find his way to Earth, meet Tulsa and tie up some loose ends with a family member.

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It's a pretty silly concept and the lengthy opening act doesn't do much to wink at or playfully joke about the exaggerated circumstances. There's a lot of time spent setting up the original mission and defining the theme of courage and bravery in traveling to new lands. It's all incredibly earnest and deadly serious.

As Gardiner grows up, starts watching Wim Wenders movies and becomes a sullen teen, suspension of disbelief is further strained. Strangely, little time is spent developing the relationship between Gardiner and Tulsa, which is where most of the early focus should have been directed.

While the first section of the film could do with a lighter tone, later sections of the feature veer too far in the opposite direction. As you might imagine, Gardiner does attempt a rendezvous, but is concerned that he has no social skills. Despite living on a populated base and having movies at his disposal, his behavior later comes across as overly exaggerated.

There are a few bits of physical comedy that earn a chuckle (his difficulty walking in Earth's gravity being one example), but most of humor involves big reactions, like jumping in shock at the mere sight of a horse. It seems like pretty inconsistent behavior for a genius who appears to have had plenty of information at his fingertips.

Gardiner doesn't understand subtlety, speaking plainly and honestly. Again, this seems like a bit of a stretch, but is a little more believable as a character trait. Unfortunately, it also results in several cornball declarations of affection during the story's more romantic passages (which includes some anti-gravity loving).

Yes, some of these moments are supposed to play as humorous, but by the end the comments are intended to be sincere and moving. It doesn't work. Not helping matters are other bits of goofiness, including some poorly-manned efforts by the major space organization to locate the boy.

There's some nice wilderness photography and the actors certainly try their best to sell it. However, the screenplay's attempts to merge serious sci-fi drama, teen romance and fish-out-of-water comedy never gel into a cohesive whole. *The Space Between Us* is an outlandish and unimpressive teen romance that launches itself firmly into an orbit of silliness.

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