

Hyde Park on Hudson

“Hyde Park on Hudson” offers an intriguing dollop of Anglo-American history and works hard at being a telling period piece, but it finally fails because of a smarmy storyline and a major casting flaw.

The timeframe is a long weekend in June 1939 when the British King George VI and his Queen Elizabeth (Samuel West and Olivia Colman) are hosted by FDR (Bill Murray) over a weekend at Hyde Park overlooking the Hudson River, marking the first-ever visit of a reigning British monarch to America.

Britain’s royals, facing imminent threats from Germany, are desperately looking to FDR for US support in the looming war effort. International affairs are commingled with the complexities of FDR’s domestic arrangements which include his fiercely independent wife Eleanor (Olivia Williams), his opinionated mother Sara (Elizabeth Wilson), his devoted secretary Missy (Elizabeth Marvel), and, not least, Margaret “Daisy” Stuckley (Laura Linney), Roosevelt’s distant cousin and eventual lover

“Hyde Park” is, sadly, heavily undercut by the actor in the lead. Bill Murray, bless his off-beat comic heart, doesn’t look anything like FDR—one of the most photographed faces in history—and he doesn’t sound like FDR—one of the most recognizable voices of the last century—and he cannot deliver the man’s distinctive panache, though he works very hard at it. He tries to strike a couple of iconic poses—cigarette holder high before a phalanx of cameras—but his presence mostly creates a deadness at the center of this drama that cannot be overcome. Worse, for a man who seems to have women on all sides, he exudes zero sexual charisma.

The film’s energy is not helped by having the story mostly told from Daisy’s point-of-view, that view being one of a mousy, sheltered being unaware both of what she was getting into and what she was witnessing as a tidbit of history. Though Laura Linney is a fine actress, she is directed and written here (by director Roger Michell and screenwriter Richard Nelson) as such a cowering creature that she makes little impression, offers little insight, and contributes little to the drama. Her most striking revelation is that FDR is having affairs with other women. Marvel’s Missy and Williams’ Eleanor come off rather better, but the latter, especially, has relatively little to do in the drama.

The most entertaining figures in this filmic landscape are George VI and his Queen Elizabeth. Both West and Colman exhibit bright and believable rapport as a couple and offer both skeptical and puzzled asides about America as they anxiously look to convince FDR and his government to join the war effort. They are particularly quizzical and funny in some riffs on American “hot dogs.”

Moviegoers can amusingly compare West and Colman with their counterparts played by Colin Firth and Helena Bonham Carter in “The King’s Speech” (2010), both couples playing these historical figures at roughly the same time. The former royals hold their own with the latter’s much praised depiction, I think, managing to appear both clever and naïve at the same time.

(This film is rated “R” and runs 94 min.)

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