

Tesla

A moody character study might be the best way to describe the new bio-pic “Tesla,” covering the life of the Serbo-Croatian engineering genius and inventor, Nikola Tesla (1856-1943) who, through his adaption of alternating current (AC) to widespread use, helped electrify our world. Here he is incarnated by a grave and humorless Ethan Hawkes, shown with a serious ‘stache and a perpetually wrinkled brow, peering into a world only he seems to fathom.

The plot provides a straightforward inventory of Tesla’s greatest hits in chronological order—contesting his AC against the DC (direct current) of Thomas Edison (Kyle McLachlan), making deals with George Westinghouse (Jim Gaffigan), designing power plants, lighting the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, inventing the Tesla Coil, collaborating with financier J.P. Morgan (Donnie Keshawarz)—all somberly and lovingly shot if not always fully explained.

At intervals, we have a running narration by Anne Morgan (Eve Hewson), J.P.’s daughter, who describes Tesla’s experiments and experiences and whose presence comes off as an intermittent tease of an emotive relationship with the scientist which never comes off—he was a stone bachelor and loner. Her narration, rather than offering much insight, provides another distancing factor to a film that is already detached. FYI: the Anne character, while real, had no personal connection to Tesla, as the film implies. Neither did actress Sarah Bernhardt (Rebecca Dayan), a Tesla contemporary, who flits through the film merely as a period marker.

Director-writer Michael Almerlyda has had a most varied career in both feature and documentary film, including an intriguing contemporary version of “Hamlet (2000),” also with Hawkes. Filming in New York and Brooklyn over 20 days, he has made “Tesla” look sumptuous on what must be a skinny budget—shooting deep black backgrounds and detailed painted backdrops to construct an effective aesthetic. But, sadly, he just hasn’t found the necessary—uh-“spark”—to make this bio-pic come fully alive.

(Note: In one of those odd movie coincidences, “Tesla” goes over ground assayed recently in “The Current War” (2017), which also told a version of the Edison-Westinghouse-Tesla rivalries with the protagonists played by Benedict Cumberbatch, Michael Shannon, and Nicholas Hoult, respectively.)

(The film is rated “PG-13,” runs 96 minutes, and was released on streaming platforms in late August).

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