

Empire of Light

Writer-director Sam Mendes's latest offering is a period drama about the staff of a English resort town's movie house with themes including mental illness and the growing racial violence of the time, told within a sweet background of cinematic nostalgia. Its strengths include its superb cinematography, a delicate score, and a fine ensemble cast led by Olivia Colman, a virtual sure-bet for an Oscar nomination. It is a worthy follow-up to Mendes' last picture from 2019, "1917"

The plot turns around the dour manager Hilary (Colman) of the Empire Cinema in an (unnamed) seaside town in the south of England, a traditional Art Deco house which has seen better days but purrs along showing a mix of reruns and first runs during the turn of the 1980's. Hilary is lonely, going through the motions at her job (she never watches films at work), and starved for affection. She occasionally goes to dance classes, has dutiful sex with her married boss, Mr. Ellis (Colin Firth), and leads a lifeless routine. We see her brighten for a chance at love when a new Black employee, the handsome Stephen (Michael Ward) joins the staff, and she looks for ways to get close to him. The team at the Empire also has distinctive crew members, including the projectionist Norman (Toby Jones), the young usher Janine (Hannah Onslow) and the veteran usher Neil (Tom Brooke)

Stephen, a decent lad, warms to Hilary but doesn't go too far as she mentors him about the work and shows him around town. He later finds companionship with the sweet Ruby (Crystal Clarke). Ellis, seeking to put his house on the map, dreams of a sprightly restoration and a splashy premiere with the 1981 hit "Chariots of Fire," with local celebrities attending.

When the premiere arrives, Hilary begins to lose it (her troubled mental state has been hinted at earlier): she makes a clumsy, unscheduled speech at the opening then rushes to call out her paramour publicly in the lobby, a horrible gaffe that gets her fired. The film has one terrifying sequence when local skinheads burst into the theater to trash it and throttle the staff, but the show goes on.

The finale is told gently, as Hilary is eventually called back to the Empire, says goodbye to Stephen as he begins a new life at university, comes to settle with her colleagues, and gets a wondrous gift from Toby.

"Empire of Light" is dominated by Colman, currently on a string of fine performances beginning with the "The Favourite" from 2018. Here she does unfussy modesty to perfection but also can explode when necessary, such as her outburst in the theater lobby. Young Ward is a cool, thoughtful customer who shows real delicacy in his relationship with Hilary. Toby Jones adds a grace note as a passionate film fan, and the usually cool Firth is here an aging swine.

Mendes paints the town carefully, its look and spaces clearly defined, especially the theater itself, with its spiffy front and lobby created by production designer Mark Tildesley, while the veteran cinematographer Roger Deakins lights everything with clarity and class. This is a nostalgia trip that merits a visit.

(The film, released in cinemas December 9, is rated "R" and runs 115 minutes.)

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