

The Imitation Game

Can valid cinematic drama be concocted out of the life of a socially inept, mildly clueless English scientific genius whose core discoveries affect the whole of mankind? Well, yes, if that figure is Stephen Hawking as played by Eddie Redmayne in “The Theory of Everything.” But wait, that was last month (see “At the Movies” for December 2014). *This* month’s version of a singular British scientist is Benedict Cumberbatch as mathematician Alan Turing in “The Imitation Game,” a compelling story of the code breakers who cracked the German’s key war code.

The form of “The Imitation Game” is that of an intelligent suspenser with a soupçon of romance. The suspense comes from the real-life work in Bletchley Park, England, beginning in 1939, to try to break the Nazi’s unfathomable Enigma Code. British authorities assembled a set of top cryptologists and linguists to find a way into the code, which changed its language variables every day through settings on its typewriter-like Enigma machine. An English commander (Charles Dance) brings together a worthy team at Bletchley, headed by Hugh Alexander (Matthew Goode) and John Cairncross (Allen Leech from “Downton Abbey”). Into this mix, at the insistence of the MI6, represented by Stewart Menzies (Mark Strong), comes Turing, an esteemed genius but a quirky sort who does not suffer fools and demands to work alone. Turing himself then recruits another singular mathematical mind, that of Joan Clarke (Keira Knightley) who, as a woman, is at first not even allowed into the precincts of the code work because of its classified nature.

Working intensely together and intrigued by each other’s minds, both Alan and Joan contemplate getting together, but it cannot be because Turing confesses he is gay. Turing’s sexual orientation (which was still a crime during his lifetime) is touched on in a framing story from 1951, which sketches his involvement with the police and an eventual interrogation, which becomes the flashback narrative of the Bletchley story. Overall, the built-in tension of will-they, won’t-they find the code (even if you know they will) is very well calibrated.

The movie, the first in English by a talented Norwegian director, Morten Tyldum, stands or falls on Cumberbatch’s performance, and, as it happens, it stands up just fine, thank you. The actor’s somewhat otherworldly appearance (for example, he played Khan, an alien character just last year in “Star Trek Into Darkness”), those piercing eyes and lanky frame, all contribute to the picture of the slightly clumsy mad scientist. Cumberbatch further enlivens and deepens the character with eccentric yet poignant line readings. He will certainly appear on some Best Actor listings in the upcoming award season.

Cumberbatch is well supported by a good ensemble cast. Knightley dials down her usual comely charm to convince as a serious mind with a human and kindly bent. Even knowing of Turing’s homosexuality, she still considers marriage with him as a blending of worthy intellects rather than a love match. Goode turns in a sly performance as a super bright cad, and Charles Dance is a lovely imperious pill as Commander Dennison. I particularly liked the ubiquitous Mark Strong (“Zero Dark Thirty,” “Low Winter Sun” on TV) as the cool, reptilian secret service agent with a fathomless

cynicism about his work.

Another element to praise in "The Imitation Game" is the magnificent creation of the code-breaking machine itself, anointed by Turing as "Christopher" (after a beloved boyhood friend), a giant whirligig of rotating alphabetic gears that takes on a life of its own as it finally crunches out Enigma's secrets.

(Rated PG-13, the film runs 103 mins.)

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