

## Judy

Judy Garland was known for the grandiose arc of her life, from movie prodigy to musical luminary to fading talent dead at 47. The new film “Judy” focuses on the last months of that arc, a last flame burning out. The film, directed by Brit Brian Goold, was written by Tom Edge, based on a successful play “End of the Rainbow” by Peter Quilter.

After her career crashes in Hollywood, Judy (Renée Zellweger) takes a chance at renewal with an offer of a five-week nightclub run at The Talk of the Town theater in London in late 1968. It’s been 30 years since she became a star in “The Wizard of Oz,” and, while her voice has weakened, her performer’s zeal has not.

Club owner Bernard Delfont (Michael Gambon) and Judy’s patient minder Rosalyn Wilder (Jesse Buckley) try to nurture her, but she is challenged by doing the new show, missing her beloved children by second husband Sid Luft (Rufus Sewell), contending with both adoring fans and drug addiction, and dealing with her new beau, Mickey Deans (Finn Whitrock), soon to be her fifth husband. Through her performance demands and personal trials, she is still able to muster some of her greatest hits one last time.

The overriding question about the movie “Judy” comes down to this: Can Renée Zellweger pull this off? A versatile and popular Hollywood fixture from the mid-1990’s to 2010, when her career hit a bad patch with a series of mediocre pictures. She took time off for six years to right herself, returning with a rehab assignment in one of signature roles, “Bridget Jones Has a Baby” (2014). But can the mature Renée carry the full weight of a movie about one of the singular performers in American show business?

Turns out she can, coming off commendably as the iconic, wounded star at the career’s end and inducing a strong dose of sympathy and compassion for her flawed character. Zellweger is appropriately small (5’3”)--Garland herself was barely five feet--and achieves the slightness and pallor of the singer near her end. Plus, she sings her own numbers, and, while purists may quibble, I found her late renditions of Garland standards convincing and touching—she was even able to evoke the poignant catch in the singer’s mature delivery as well as to belt out a brassy finale. In fact, I found that (as a witness to 30 years of Garland’s career) Zellweger’s speaking voice as Judy was, if anything, more believable than her crooning.

Make-up, hairdressing, and wardrobe all helped transform Renée into Judy, especially her late-in-life spiky black hair and spangly outfits. These technicians must have done serious research to achieve “the look.” As for her off-stage sequences (most of the picture) she credibly portrays a famously capricious woman, turning from a nasty junkie through a ferocious mother hen to an adorable and generous sweetheart free with the tossing off her signature “Dahlings.” The latter incarnation is shown particularly well in a terrific sequence

where she (feeling lonely after a show) invites herself to the apartment of two older gay male super fans, of which she had legions. They can't believe their good luck at hosting their idol who turns out to be comforting them instead of the other way around. And, better yet, singing only to them.

"Judy" is essentially a one-woman show, but it is graced by some good supporting performers such as Buckley's contained but supportive aide, and Whitrock's smooth but smarmy boyfriend.

One sour note: the film contains several flashback sequences to the young Judy being ordered around an MGM set by an imperious Louis B. Mayer during the shooting of "The Wizard of Oz." These scenes are supposed to serve as the backstory for her later, chronic drug use, but they don't convince, and, moreover, the teenage Judy (played by Darci Shaw) looks nothing like the real thing. (*The film is rated PG-13 and runs 118 mins.*)

(September 2019)