

Last Chance Harvey

Last Chance Harvey is a pleasing confection from English writer/director Joel Hopkins starring Dustin Hoffman and Emma Thompson. This is one of those “meet-cute” pictures where the protagonists connect in an unlikely setting. But, for once, the “cute meeters” are mature human beings rather than Kate/Reese Hudson/Witherspoon and Matthew/Vince McConaughey/Vaughn.

Harvey Shine (Hoffman) is a 60-something New York musician whose career, writing accompaniment to TV commercials, is shriveling. He’s in London to attend the wedding of his beloved, but now distant daughter. Emma is Kate Walker, a mildly woebegone spinster who takes travel surveys at London’s Heathrow Airport and who dutifully looks after her skittish mum (Eileen Atkins). In London, Harvey finds that his daughter prefers that her step dad (James Brolin) give her away, as does his resentful ex (Kathy Baker). Harvey’s ostracism, and a call killing a last job prospect, send him back to Heathrow for a quick exit.

An airport bar is where Harvey and Kate meet cute, fence, dally a bit, then end up strolling London and, gradually, connecting to each other with a mix of good humor and mild confession. Key moments come when Harvey decides, after all, to attend his daughter’s wedding and invites Kate to come along, and when she, finally, is able to fend off her pesky mother. Sure, the film is predictable, but the gentle ride is still gratifying, principally because of its stars.

Emma Thompson is such a self-evidently competent and charming actress (and person) that it is a test for her to play someone so diffident and hesitant about life—though she has done it before (try *Sense and Sensibility*). Here she captures the essence of the reserved, but innately intelligent Kate, who only needs the blunter stimulus of the American Harvey to gently blossom. As Harvey, Hoffman personifies the man at one end of his rope, with his world collapsing so fully that he comes to realize that he has nothing left to lose, and that this quiet woman truly appreciates his openness, his humor, even his jazz piano playing.

This is not bravura acting, but rather sweet interplay by the two leads building up their wholly sympathetic characters in increments of action and talk, and aided amply by Hopkins’ believable dialogue and a largely sunlit and handsome London town to walk around in. A romantic comedy for grown ups.

(“*Last Chance Harvey*” is rated “PG-13;” 92 mins.)

(February 2009)