

Puzzle

A new character-driven charmer has come to city screens. “Puzzle” is a modest story of self-discovery whose origin is not literary but rather based on another movie script. Its achievements, too, are relatively modest, except for a superb lead performance from an actor too little known: Scottish actress Kelly Macdonald.

“Puzzle” introduces us to the circumscribed life of Agnes (Macdonald), dutiful wife of burly auto mechanic Louie (David Denham) and mom of two mature boys, living in the house of her widowed father where she grew up in Bridgeport, Connecticut. The film opens with a sequence devoid of dialogue in which Agnes takes on every menial task for a family party in a setting that appears to be the mid-1950’s. Only well in do we realize that the party is for **her own 40th birthday** and the time is contemporary, since one son gives her an iPhone as a present. Another gift is a jigsaw puzzle, which she accepts placidly. Once alone, working the puzzle, she solves it readily. It is the first time she experiences the heady thrill of being very good at something.

A visit to a puzzle shop leads to her answering a request (while learning how to manipulate her iPhone) for teaming up with another puzzler for competitions. Thus, Agnes anxiously goes to the Manhattan townhouse of Robert (Irrfan Khan), a wealthy, one-time inventor. Robert immediately recognizes her talent and recruits her as his partner for an upcoming national jigsaw tournament. Though still mired in her routine life, Agnes now has an outlet to a wider world (about which her family knows nothing). The stimulus of puzzling and conversing with sophisticated, enigmatic Robert finds her both discovering new aspects of herself and taking on a new assertiveness in dealing with the men in her family. Though Louie and sons are puzzled by and critical of her newfound boldness, she gently defies them and enters the national jigsaw contest to test her mettle—and perhaps to change her future.

Kelly Macdonald first drew cinematic attention as a young woman in British pictures like “Trainspotting” (1996) and “Gosford Park” (2001). Since, she has made an impression in a great variety of films and TV shows on both sides of the pond, perhaps most notably in “No Country for Old Men” (2007) and the HBO series “Boardwalk Empire” (2010-14). In “Puzzle,” she is pretty much the whole show, appearing in virtually every scene, and pulling off the transformation of the timid drudge to a self-confident woman while still maintaining a modest demeanor and quiet tone (delivered in an excellent American accent). Her standing up to her husband and family is the more touching for being measured, never agitated. She a mouse that finds her roar.

Marc Turtletaub, a longtime Hollywood producer, here directs for the first time from a script by Polly Mann and Oren Moverman (“Love and Mercy”), who adapted the story from an Argentine film of 2009 called “Rompecabezas” (which means “puzzle” in Spanish). The script and production, according to Turtletaub, tried to avoid making Agnes a totally browbeaten, pathetic creature and to likewise avoid making Louie a one-note slob: to depict a mundane but naturalistic family. All the actors do fine work in this context, especially Denham, who portrays a decent if rough guy who truly loves his wife but wants comfortable, predictable patterns in his life. Irrfan Khan (“The Lunchbox”), grand, imposing and imperious in voice, contrasts in every way from the vulnerable Agnes, but he makes his infatuation with her believable.

(The film is rated “R” and runs 102 mins.)

Kelly Macdonald on “Puzzle”

Kelly Macdonald, along with her director Marc Turtletaub, appeared in Washington in mid-July for a preview screening of “Puzzle” and took questions about their new film.

Macdonald opened by saying that the script for the film “bowled me over,” in part because so much of her character was portrayed without dialogue. The biggest thing she realized about her character in the opening scenes was that she “was completely invisible—she’s not there!” She said she prepared in part by watching a lot of silent films to study how to put muteness into action and even looked for ways “to get rid of some dialogue” to further ground her performance of Agnes. (In an aside, Turtletaub said he purposely aimed to have Macdonald “fade into the wallpaper patterned on her old dresses to seem old-fashioned”).

For the family scenes, Macdonald said she and the rest of the cast “just hung out” in a house in Yonkers, New York, for six weeks. They did not rehearse. “You have to become friendly quickly,” she remarked “to establish a rapport.” Much of that team building came from “spending time in the back garden (of the location house) in lawn chairs—good ones—bought from Costco.” Asked about how she achieved a viable American accent, the Scottish actress—who normally possesses a lovely brogue—said “having a good dialogue coach on set.”

Macdonald knew nothing of the competitive puzzling scene when she came into the film but developed her own routine to appear to be a competent solver and “that came to have a reverberating effect” on her performance. She found the Agnes character “lovely” and her development a pleasure to take on. “We don’t know how her journey ends,” Macdonald noted, “but she needs to go on a personal journey.”

(August 2018)