

The Hummingbird Project

Trenchant movies about business or industry are rare. More frequently movies feature familiar stereotypes of the crass industrialist or the corporate giant. This may seem surprising, given that American life is so bound up in “business,” but it may be because the subject is seen as not inherently dramatic or lacking in necessary conflict. Still, filmmakers occasionally come up with an incisive take on the business world. Recently, the digitized, internet-charged world has appeared in some telling dramas, such as “Margin Call,” “The Social Network,” and “The Big Short.” A new entry into this genre is “The Hummingbird Project,” a modern economic tale by Canadian writer-director Kim Nguyen. It may not be a masterpiece, but it offers an intriguing premise and a pell-mell pace that makes it very watchable.

“The Hummingbird Project” plunges us into the recent past of a Wall Street gone numbers-mad: the world of High-Frequency Trading. Second-generation immigrants and cousins Vincent and Anton Zaleski (Jesse Eisenberg and Alexander Skarsgård, respectively) are players in this high-stakes game where winning is measured in milliseconds. They come up with a plan to gain just one of those milliseconds of advantage by building a straight fiber-optic cable line between Kansas and New Jersey (and two stock exchanges), a scheme that could anticipate market quotes by a hair, thus making them millions. Their concept is so brilliant that they do not want to share it with their company, headed by Eva Torres (Salma Hayek), a fiery and manipulative trader. Instead, they strike out on their own with money from a wealthy investor and with the crucial codes that Anton has developed at work.

Anton is the brains of the pair, a repressed theoretical physicist and code master, while Vincent is the motor-mouth front man, talking big with a velocity approaching their high-speed cable. Together the two push each other and all around them, including their project manager Mark Vega (Michael Mando), as they cajole landowners to cede their properties, deal with technical glitches, and overcome natural barriers. Looking for revenge, Torres furiously challenges them by trying to find that millisecond—the flap of a hummingbird wing—through constructing a series of massive transmitters. The effort pushes both the Zaleskis to their breaking points.

Unlike the aforementioned “Social Network” or “The Big Short,” Nguyen has not taken his story from real life, but instead concocted a fable for our times. What it may lack in reality, it makes up for in momentum: a chase to the finish and, more importantly, a study in the personal dynamics of Vince and Anton. Nguyen himself has said that, in working on the film, he found he had developed “an ‘Of Mice and Men’ kind of relationship.”

That dynamic between the cousins is well handled by Eisenberg and Skarsgård. They fence and they fight, they get frustrated with each other, they bond and re-bond; they are utterly different yet utterly devoted to each other and their task. Eisenberg is by now somewhat typecast as the smart but insecure New Yorker, garrulous to the point of panic (see “The Social Network,” “End of the Tour,” and “Café Society,” among others). He expertly fills that kind of role again, a man with ambitions that turn to obsessions. The handsome and prolific Skarsgård has usually portrayed both good and bad studs, but in “Hummingbird” he acts against type as a dedicated, but anti-social,

scientist, eschewing charm by performing with a bald head and lumbering gait. His Anton is just as obsessed as Vince, but he reflects every pressure back into himself.

Less suitable is Hayek as Eva. She's meant to be a harridan boss, OK, but she is so unhinged that the character grates. Perhaps director Nguyen meant her to be the film's comic relief, but her character is completely implausible and, worse, she's not funny!

(The film, now in theaters, runs 111 minutes and is rated "R" for language).

(March 2019)