

The host of 'Late Night' steals the show

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««« out of «««««

Running Time: 102 minutes

Most late-night shows look like smoothly produced and effortless exercises in entertainment, bringing stand-up and celebrity guests together and speaking about latest projects and topics of the day. Of course, it's an immense amount of work for the host and even more so for the writers tasked with creating talking points almost nightly for a national market. The new comedy *Late Night* attempts to shed some light on the process and one woman's attempt to fulfill her aspirations.

Chemical plant worker Molly Patel (Mindy Kaling) has always dreamed of being a comedy writer and after talking to a company head who also owns a TV network, is given an interview in New York City to create jokes for late night show host Katherine Newbury (Emma Thompson). Newbury, whose ratings are falling and has a notorious reputation as being a cutthroat and vicious boss, is also taking heat for having an all-male staff. She agrees to add Molly to the team as a diversity hire, who soon feels the pressure of writing for a comedy program, along with the ire of fellow employees like monologue scribe Tom Campbell (Reid Scott). However, Molly's positive attitude eventually pays off, winning over members of the crew as she attempts to help her temperamental boss stay relevant to audiences and adapt to new trends.

The main character may be Molly, but the most entertaining role is clearly Newbury. The host is

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so acerbic and hard-nosed as she insults and takes down members of her crew and staff that she demands attention. Thompson is exceptional in the role, making the stand-offish figure sharp-tongued, threatening and somehow likable. Some of her tendencies, including calling writers by an assigned number instead of having to remember their names, are particularly amusing. As the story progresses, reasons are opined for her cool demeanor and the performer does a wonderful job of displaying how a work-obsessed personality in the spotlight can soon begin to take out her frustrations and insecurities on others. This part is the film's true stand out.

Kaling acquits herself well as Molly, displaying all the highs and lows as well as hurt feelings that go into having such a crucial role on the show. The sweet-natured character also gets in a few jabs at her sexist coworkers and makes some points at the expense of the nastiness and competitiveness of the business, as the need for a ratings boost becomes more and more important. She is certainly a congenial enough lead, although some of the naiveté comes across as a little too forced. It seems impossible to believe that anyone would be so surprised and taken aback by the behavior witnessed in this fast-paced, high-stress working environment, or be so blunt and oblivious in offering critiques of what may not be working on the show.

And the movie follows a routine format, bringing up some interesting situations involving the workplace, only to deal with them in a glossy, superficial manner. Viewers can rest assured that every single one of the concerns raised are dealt with and resolved within the running time, leaving the fictional world in a happier place. Honestly, it seems a strange and inauthentic call given the harshness and tears suffered through the first half of the feature.

While these aspects are too conventional for their own good, at least Emma Thompson is consistently thrilling to watch as the talk show host, offering up entertaining vitriol and bite regularly during the running time. In fact, one wishes that she had been an even nastier adversarial force for the protagonist to overcome and wear down.

Late Night has some predictable elements and doesn't feel quite as cutting as it might have if it had really decided to shatter some of the illusions about working on a TV show. But it does have a magnetic and engaging co-lead that provides the movie with a great deal of tension, awkwardness and humor over the course of the story. It may not win the ratings battle, but it does score some points when it's at its most finely tuned.

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