

Variables in 'Tesla' hurt the experiment

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 18 September 2020 03:07



Rating: «« out of 4

Running Time: 102 minutes

This movie from IFC Films is available for streaming rental on most platforms.

Biopics can be a difficult business. Condensing a complex person's life into a couple of hours and following a conventional narrative format doesn't give one enough time to really do justice to the subject or present a complex portrait of their experiences. Still, many try and several do manage to both entertain and enlighten. *Tesla* details the life of a famous and enigmatic personality who, among other discoveries, was responsible for inventing and developing the alternating current system that powers much of the world today.

Anne Morgan (Eve Hewson), narrates the story of Nicola Tesla (Ethan Hawke) an obsessive Serbian inventor who emigrated to the U.S. in the 1880s. Working tirelessly for Thomas Edison (Kyle MacLachlan), the protagonist is upset after his proposal for an alternating current motor system is deemed unfit, unsafe and unprofitable by his superiors. Tesla quits in frustration and continues his work elsewhere. Along the way, he befriends the independent Anne, who forms a close bond that flirts with becoming a romance. The inventor also finds a new supporter in George Westinghouse (Jim Gaffigan).

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However, with all his attention focused exclusive on his work, Anne becomes frustrated with Tesla. The scientist is also taken advantage of by his investors after it becomes clear he doesn't care about personal wealth and only desires funding to continue his research.

The film's highlight is Hawke, who ably embodies the famous figure and captures his focus and drive to create life-changing scientific advances. He's very convincing in the part and discussions involving Tesla and his friends about their important work are inspiring to watch. Even conversations between inventors involving disappointment and sadness after someone's effort is misunderstood, or their ground-breaking idea arrives too late feel authentic and add empathy to the characters and their pursuits.

However, many of these scientists do live in their heads and the movie attempts to add some unusual gimmicks to add visual flair. Narration is interspersed throughout with plans and stills of inventions. These bits are fine and help clarify some accomplishments, but there are other accoutrements that don't fit in. Central storyteller Anne is written and presented in an unusually modern manner.

She certainly dresses like a woman of the era, but speaks and carries herself in an anachronistic way (at one point even using a laptop as she tells the story). Some scenes also present unreliable narration. An argument or incongruous conflict will break out like it might have occurred in a recent era before Anne presents the real story of what actually occurred. While it's a bold choice in presenting the story in a way that one wouldn't expect, these bits are more often jarring and distracting.

Another bit of strangeness occurs late in the movie when Nicola Telsa picks up a microphone and performs a karaoke version of a Tears for Fears song to sum up a series of events. It's amusing in the moment and adds unpredictability to the proceedings, but also takes one out of the story. Hawke is talented enough to pull some of it off and occasionally raise a smile. Still, the attempts make the viewer feel like the filmmakers didn't believe that the characters themselves would be interesting or relatable enough to audiences without modern references thrown in.

The subject is fascinating and his passion is quite compelling to watch, but the contemporary touches in *Tesla* are hit-and-miss and don't help us to understand the figure any better. This reviewer is all for attempting something new, but had difficulty adjusting to the movie's avant-garde additions. In the end, these unexpected variants end up hurting the experiment and

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ultimately take viewers out of the story.

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