Rating: «««

out of ««««

Running Time: 112 minutes

This feature is currently available to stream on Netflix.

The fields of archeology and excavation have served as incredible and informative windows into the past, helping paint a more accurate picture of lives lost centuries ago. Many feature films use the profession as a means of setting up an action/adventure narrative and several have done it effectively. However, there are also some amazing true stories and personal trials involved in uncovering these artifacts. *The Dig* is a biopic that details one such tale.

There isn’t a great deal of action, but it is a remarkably well-acted and engrossing low-key drama with an emphasis on the personalities involved in one such find.

With World War II looming, ailing English landowner Edith Pretty (Carey Mulligan) contacts a provincial excavator named Basil Brown (Ralph Fiennes) to help her on a pet project. She hopes that there may be something, perhaps from the Viking Age, hidden underneath large mounds of dirt sitting on her property. The two very different, but determined personalities find common ground and slowly uncover something special. This attracts the attention of outside forces, including snobby Cambridge archeologist, Charles Phillips (Ken Stott).

He and his professional cohorts arrive and begin wrestling the find away from its original discoverer. With the war certain to stop all progress, more characters associated with Pretty and Phillips rush to the scene to help. The film not only deals with the dig, but the lives of all involved as they locate old relics and contemplate their various histories.

All of the characters introduced, quietly grapple with personal issues and early segments of the film subtly address their motivations for this unusual undertaking. Widow Pretty is much sicker than she lets on in public and is wrestling with her own mortality and what will be left behind for her young son (Archie Barnes). Brown is obsessed with his work (at the expense of his wife), feels undervalued for his skills, and is rightfully concerned about being tossed aside with the arrival of more prominent names at the site. Even the new team members who show up have their own problems.

We briefly get hints of how Phillips and a local museum are motivated to profit from the discovery.

The experience also causes friction between two married archeologists (Lily James and Ben Chaplin) after one of them begins spending extended periods of time with Pretty’s cousin, Rory (Johnny Flynn).

There are actually numerous subplots and the romance might seem like a stretch, but the performers are all charismatic and manage to sell the burgeoning relationship. There are also some sweet moments as a surrogate father/son relationship between Brown and Pretty’s young son begins to form. As for drama, there are few shouting matches between these characters and everything is understated, but the movie does an admirable job of addressing the conflicts that these stubborn personalities face in their daily lives. The movie also looks very attractive, with scenic photography of the estate during sunset and under various weather conditions.

Of course, the dig site itself is visually interesting as the principal discovery is unearthed and viewers see items being swept from under the dirt.

While it isn’t a showy exercise, *The Dig* is a compelling narrative about the profession. And the feature cleverly uses archeological metaphors about looking for relics and discovering new finds and details about our common past. In the case of this story, the moral ends up being applicable to those directly involved in the excavation. The lessons learned can also be applied to modern life. As such, this undertaking is rewarding and one worth your time.

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By Glenn Kay
For the Sun