

'Rock the Kasbah' could use some fine-tuning

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: <<< *out of 4 Stars*

Running Time: 100 min.

Director Barry Levinson has had a storied career filled with plenty of strong titles (*Diner*, *The Natural*

,
Rain Man

,
Bugsy

,
Wag the Dog

) and a few misfires (
Toys

,
Sphere

,
Bandits

). His latest,
Rock the Kasbah

, falls somewhere in between. The flick features an entertaining Murray and some impressively shot locales, but struggles when it comes to the more serious elements and delivering its overall message.

Richie Lanz (Billy Murray) is an aging rock tour manager, struggling for cash and working out of a motel in Van Nuys, California. To make some fast money, he accepts an offer to take a client (Zooey Deschanel) on a USO military tour of Afghanistan. After arriving, the talent steals the protagonist's passport, money and flees. In debt and without any documentation, Richie must use his wits to talk his way out of the war-torn country. Along the way, he also discovers a

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teenager named Salima (Leem Lubany) who may have the star qualities that he's always been searching for.

As always, Murray is a lot of fun to watch. Much of the material feels improvised and when the character is in over his head, it can be quite funny. Among his newfound acquaintances are a pair of illegal ammo dealers (Danny McBride and Scott Caan), a prostitute (Kate Hudson) and a tough mercenary (Bruce Willis). He's constantly in danger early on and his fast-talking interchanges with the various underhanded types result in a few laughs. One amusing thread are Richie's conversations with the soldier of fortune and his attempts to help find "a hook" for the tough guy's unpublished autobiography.

Ritchie is also dynamic when he's telling exaggerated stories of his glory days with rock stars (and the importance of a singer being at just the right level of irritating). However, the movie is as much of a drama as it is comedy, and this aspect isn't nearly as effective. After discovering Salima, Ritchie personally takes her under his wing and attempts to land her a position on *Afghan Star*

, the country's equivalent of *American Idol*

. Unfortunately, a woman doing so is forbidden. This is reportedly the section of the film inspired by true events, and it definitely appears to take liberties.

While there are jokes here and there, from this point forward the message become loud, clear and occasionally forced. Ritchie is shown as the primary motivator, arguing with the teen to break tradition and the show producers to let her on against the religious views of the country's conservative factions. Frankly, it becomes awkward to watch an outsider impose his ideas on those around him (I could be wrong, but from what I've read about the real story, the girl and show producers took action without a foreigner pontificating to them on the importance of "freedom"). Murray does his best to keep it as subtle as possible, but there's still a lingering oddness about it all.

In general, there's also a loose approach to the proceedings. The movie does tend to ramble, characters enter and then disappear from the movie, and it all ends up causing some pacing issues. Without the star's charm on display, this movie could have easily fallen to pieces. Truthfully, I had mixed feelings about *Rock the Kasbah*, and also see it having trouble appealing to general audiences. Murray and the cast are fine and make the most of what they have, but the approach to the drama could have used a bit of fine-tuning.