

‘Three Thousand Years of Longing’ leaves audience longing for a bit more

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 02 September 2022 03:40



Rating: ««

out of «««««

Running Time: 108 minutes

This film from MGM/United Artists will be released exclusively in theaters on Aug. 26.

The career of director George Miller has involved many leaps from genre to genre. Best known for the “Mad Max” series, he is also responsible for the “Babe” films, animated “Happy Feet” franchise and the medical drama “Lorenzo’s Oil.”

His latest is another left turn, telling a fantastical tale of a woman who encounters a Djinn (which is a genie from Arabic mythology). Several recent movies have used this figure as a monster who terrorizes humans, but this movie takes a different approach to the subject matter. Part folklore tale, part dark comedy and part romance, “Three Thousand Years of Longing” is certainly audacious. It’s also a bit of a mixed bag, but one that is consistently intriguing.

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Reserved loner Alithea Binnie (Tilda Swinton) is a renowned narratologist, or expert on written stories and the narrative structure used to tell them. While visiting the city of Istanbul on a speaking engagement, she begins having strange visions. Things get even more bizarre after purchasing a glass bottle that contains an actual Djinn (Idris Elba).

He appears and tells Binnie that she has been granted three wishes. When she uses them up, he will be freed from his glass prison. The suspicious but quizzical protagonist gets into a lengthy, humorous conversation with Djinn, informing him that in tales like these the wishes almost always backfire.

He tries to convince her otherwise, detailing his previous owners and how they failed when making their requests, as well as explaining the negative impact it had on his existence. As they talk, a mutual attraction builds, adding further complications.

Much of the movie involves an extended back and forth between Binnie and the Djinn, desperate to convince her of his honesty and the despair he has felt being trapped in a tiny bottle. The stuffy Binnie’s reaction to interacting with a character she has always firmly believed to be fictional is very funny. Her pointed questions are equally winning to watch.

Additionally, the Djinn has plenty of comical moments as he tries to coax wishes out of Binnie, as well as catch up with what has occurred in the world since being bottled up. The interplay between the two characters is engaging and it’s fun to see these two very different figures open up and develop a close relationship.

And thankfully, the entire movie does not take place within a single location. As Djinn shares his tragic personal history, the movie delivers some phenomenal visuals. These segments that recount tales from earlier eras of wishes gone wrong are at times a wonder to behold.

Cinematographer John Seale (“Mad Max: Fury Road,” “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone,” “The English Patient”) employs impressive lighting and allows the camera to hurtle down hallways through incredible sets filled with odd individuals and strange sights (including a jarring monster or two). These images alone keep one’s attention.

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Sadly, the climax of the movie feels a bit rushed and doesn't deliver on an emotional level.

Part of the problem may have to do with the lead character herself. Binnie is amusing, but something of an eccentric who lives in her own head. In the end, her deepest desire has more to do with narrative mechanics and form as it relates to being a part of an epic fable.

So, while the film does manage to find an appropriate finale for the lead character and her unusual companion, her unique wants aren't as immediately relatable and do not make for a soul-stirring or poignant close.

Having said that, the movie is plenty about the title that is fine. It doesn't look like typical studio fare and is consistently wondrous to behold. The two leads are a treat to watch, as are the wild tales from the Djinn. It's an enjoyable movie that only really stumbles as it reaches its final act and strains to give its characters a stirring narrative close.

“Three Thousand Years of Longing” may ultimately leave one wishing for a bit more. It doesn't successfully juggle all of its elements and the ending disappoints, but the movie still has a few winning moments and will provide fantasy film fans with a few bright spots along the way.

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