

The Adjustment Bureau

“The Adjustment Bureau” is a spirited, compelling pastiche. It positively extrudes different genres: political drama, romance, fantasy picture, science fiction, as well as chase thriller, yet it combines them into an animated, bubbly blend that is highly entertaining.

The story is one in which you must simply suspend disbelief and just—go with it. You either accept the funky otherworld premise or you don’t, but if you do, it’s a lively ride. A rising young Brooklyn politician, David Norris (Mark Damon), running for senator from New York, meets cute with a young dancer, Elise Sellas (Emily Blunt) in a men’s washroom. From this first funky encounter, David is plainly smitten. It appears, however, that a cadre of angelic guys in gray flannel Mad Men suits (led by a sympathetic Anthony Mackie and a droll John Slattery) finds that the couple’s meeting was not meant to be but was rather an aberration in the Overall Scheme of Things (it happens, incidentally, only because of a spilled cup of coffee).

These businesslike guys of The Adjustment Bureau (another figure, played archly by Terence Stamp, later joins the story) try to get the fates aligned by keeping the two apart but David, hopelessly in love with Elise, finds a way to be with her even if he must challenge destiny’s grip. Much of the plot involves his trying to thwart the powers that want to re-set the wrinkle in time he has caused, and both characters learn that they have to sacrifice for each other and their love rather than, separately, attain their true predestined ends as president (he) and renowned choreographer (her).

This narrative may seem reminiscent of recent fantasy flicks like “The Matrix” series or “Inception,” but it replaces their moroseness (or seriousness, if you must) with a lighter, more human touch. In tone, “The Adjustment Bureau” is closer to gentler angelic interventions of an earlier era, like “Here Comes Mr. Jordan” and “It’s a Wonderful Life.” It also avoids the stolidity of protagonists like Keanu Reeves and Leonardo Di Caprio in the above-cited films by supplying the full-blooded Damon, surely one of our best contemporary movie actors. He is convincing as the ambitious—yet ambivalent—political animal yet utterly charming, too, in his relationship with the very different creature played by Blunt. And speaking of charm, Blunt offers it in abundance as a blithe, beguiling spirit who still is serious about her art and, ultimately, serious about her man. Character chemistry is crucial in stories like this, and Damon and Blunt prove most chemically compatible.

George Nolfi, the writer and director of “The Adjustment Bureau,” took his chief plot element (the Bureau idea) from a 1950’s story by the science fiction writer Philip E. Dick, but he has retooled it completely for the screen, adding the romance element for one. He has written inventive scripts before; both “Oceans Eleven” and “The Bourne Ultimatum” starred Matt Damon, as a matter of fact. Here Nolfi makes a heartening directorial debut combining his clever script, ripe characterizations, some fine New York locations, plus a judicious, not ostentatious, use of special effects (there are a lot of neat surprises behind closed doors), which actually advance the plot rather than call attention to themselves.

Classy diversion is not to be pooh-poohed in these times, and this film has it.

(Rated PG-13 for some profanity and sexual themes, it runs a 106 fast-moving minutes.)

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