



The irrepressible Billy (Bill Nighy) celebrates his holiday hit single with typical caustic aplomb.

PETER MOUNTAIN, UNIVERSAL PICTURES, 2003.

Beautiful Dreamers

Twenty-two characters in search of love.

LOVE ACTUALLY: Written and directed by Richard Curtis. Produced by Duncan Kenworthy. Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner. Cinematography, Michael Coulter. Production design, Jim Clay. Editor, Nick Moore. Costumes, Joanna Johnston. Music, Craig Armstrong. Music supervisor, Chris Thompson. Starring Alan Rickman, Bill Nighy, Colin Firth, Emma Thompson, Hugh Grant, Laura Linney, Liam Neeson, Martine McCutcheon, Keira Knightley, Rowan Atkinson, Andrew Lincoln, Billy Bob Thornton, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Heike Makatsch, Lucia Monez, Martin Freeman, Joanna Page and Thomas Sangster. Studio Canal. Working Title. Universal Pictures, 2003.

From the Prime Minister (Hugh Grant) to a love-struck 11-year old boy, Sam (Thomas Sangster), the characters in this romantic ensemble work have troubles of the heart. Some stories have a greater poignancy, such as that of Sam's stepfather (Liam Neeson), who misses his late wife and doesn't want to meet a new woman. The best, hands down, involves a former rock star, Billy (Bill Nighy), who wants to have a Christmas hit so badly he's willing to be honest with his fans and the media. He's a kick.

Most stories contain elements of surprise, but many plots are retreads. One of my favorite pieces involves a new bride, Juliet (Keira Knightley), and the groom's best man, Mark (Andrew Lincoln), who is in love with her. Mark finds a unique way to tell Juliet of his feelings without compromising her or betraying his friend and her husband, Peter (Chiwetel Ejiofor of *Dirty Pretty Things*). But having the bachelor P.M. (Grant) fall for a down-to-earth secretary who works for him, Natalie (Martine McCutcheon), may be bit too pat for those who don't love Grant. His role here does not compare to the complex heel he played in *Bridget Jones' Diary* or the womanizing cad who gets his comeuppance in *About a Boy*, but Grant still works his claim on the foolish but endearing lover.

The more traditional British marital triangle is represented by long-married Harry (Alan Rickman) and Karen (Emma Thompson) and a younger woman who

wants him, Mia (Heike Makatsch). Karen shows Harry the way back into the heart of his family, but Thompson lets us see the heavy price Karen pays for her kindness. Another could-be cliché involves Jamie (Colin Firth), a writer nursing his girlfriend's rejection. He falls for a housemaid, Aurelia (Lucia Monez), who doesn't speak his language nor he hers. The actors have to overcome the limitations of the characters to come across as real people that we can care about. Sometimes it works, sometimes not.

The most offbeat romance is played out by John (Martin Freeman) and Judy (Joanna Page) as actors working on a movie set as body doubles for the absent stars. In nude, steamy sex scenes, Judy and John strike up banal conversations completely at odds with the sexual gyrations of their bodies. No deeper than a sight gag, these scenes provide relief from more hackneyed plot lines.

The film is beautifully designed, well-paced and shot, with pretty people and a holiday cheerfulness that lifts it above some of the heavier films of the season. Writer, director Richard Curtis has written such popular, large-cast films as *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Notting Hill* and my fave, *Bridget Jones's Diary*. This is Curtis' directorial debut, and he uses accomplished actors who fill in the cracks and give us minor characters as rounded and complicated as we can expect.

But the something for everyone intention of the filmmakers grates for those who know that film can be more exciting and involving than following the dictum "give them what they want." *Love Actually* is a seasonal confection, candy for the eyes and as warming as a hot buttered rum on a snowy night. If that's what you need, this is the place to get it. Now playing at Movies 12.

EW

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