

Cultural Daily

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Love Actually Brings Holiday Cheer

Steve Gottfried · Sunday, December 23rd, 2018

If you're looking for the perfect antidote to the troubled times we're living through and in search of a thoroughly entertaining, unabashed celebration of love to sweep you off your feet, get thee to the Wallis Center for the Performing Arts between now and December 31st. Whatever impressions you may have about the 2003 movie, banish them from your thoughts, or at least set them aside. Produced under the auspices of For the Record Live, this feel-good movie which served as something of a salve in the aftermath of 9/11 is transformed into something joyous and strangely relevant in the trying times we're currently living through. When I first heard *Love Actually* (2003) was being staged as a live musical, I was admittedly circumspect. I had only a hazy recollection of the movie as one of those inconsequential Hugh Grant rom-coms with a fun-pack of familiar faces in supporting roles which included Colin Firth, Emma Thompson, Alan Rickman and Laura Linney, among others. In hindsight, it seemed like one of those schmaltzy Hallmark Christmas movies where everyone finds love and lives happily ever after. Which is more or less true. It turns out that cheesy movie has legions of fans worldwide, giving it a status rivaling that other Christmas staple, *It's a Wonderful Life*. And so it was with some bit of trepidation that I rolled the dice on a recent Sunday matinee. Would my cold cynical MSNBC-junkie heart be reduced to a puddle of goo?

After a stressful morning dealing with the discovery that a broken pipe behind our dishwasher had wreaked havoc on our home, I wasn't in what you would call a festive mood. But as I took my seat and feasted my gaze on the gorgeous, evocative sets and Christmas tree at center stage, I found myself beginning to relax. When the first actor (Sean Yves Lessard as the Hugh Grant character) took the stage and started singing, his stellar vocals (and equally disarming looks) let me know I was in for something special. Little did I know that I would get swept up in the cornball spirit and completely gobsmacked by this reconfigured multimedia spectacle and stunned by the caliber of talent on display. What's more, I found to my surprise, that upon revisiting this light and airy rom-com some 15 years later, it had surprising depth and insight which belied its simple premise.

Over the course of the next two and a half hours, clips from the movie played on large projection screens as the actors in the movie were soon eclipsed by live actors (dressed in similar outfits to their onscreen counterparts) bursting into songs from the movie soundtrack. The way everything was integrated and staged to seamlessly and effortlessly move the story forward and draw our attention to the various star-crossed lovers, was superb. In a strange way, it reminded me of *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, the Woody Allen movie where the characters in the movie literally step off the screen and come to life among the audience. There's no doubt, a great deal of credit for transcending the limitations of the movie goes to the inventive staging and immensely talented

cast. The soundtrack, chock full of musical numbers including iconic staples from the Beatles' "All You Need Is Love," Joni Mitchell's "The River," the Beach Boys' "God Only Knows," to period ear candy like the Pointer Sisters' "Jump" and more contemporary earworms like Rob Thomas' "Smooth" and Kelly Clarkson's "The Trouble With Love Is" is sure to put you in the holiday spirit and give you all kinds of feels.



Rumer Willis stuns as seductive secretary Mia in "Love Actually Live" at the Wallis. Photo credit: Kevin Parry.

The concept of taking a popular movie and transforming it into a live production using the music from the movie soundtrack as performed by live actors while playing clips from the movie was the brainchild of Shane Scheel and Anderson Davis. The original concept, birthed some eight years ago in a small bar in East Los Angeles, was to harvest the soundtrack from an amalgam of a noted director's body of work and bring it to life on stage with a cast of talented performers. Humble beginnings mushroomed to national, then international venues (even cruise ships). Previous productions include the films of Martin Scorsese, John Hughes, Quentin Tarantino and Baz Luhrman. I'm not quite sure what inspired them to choose this cream puff of a movie in the age of Trump, but this unabashed tribute to love is as disarming as it is charming. In lesser hands, it could've been an epic misfire. But it's the execution and the caliber of talent that seals the deal and wins the audience over, hook line and sinker. Standouts among a cast of standouts include Rumer Willis, pulling double duty as Mia (a seductive secretary who threatens to upend a marriage) and Juliet (a bride who discovers the best man is in love with her). Willis consistently delivers with powerhouse vocals. The same can be said of the entire cast, including Sean Yves Lessard (as the aforementioned Hugh Grant character) and Justin Matthew Sargent as the Best Man who falls in love with his buddy's bride. Kelley Jakle (as the Laura Linney character) and Tomasina Abate (as the Emma Thompson character) deliver gorgeous vocals on the Joni Mitchell song "The River." And special mention must also be paid to the vocal fireworks provided by B. Slade (as Peter, the unsuspecting groom whose Best Man has fallen in love with his bride) who delivers a show-stopping rendition of "White Christmas."

While these interconnected stories of love lost and love found may be somewhat implausible and trite, what the movie, and by extension, this staged reinvention does so successfully is convey a message we need now more than ever – that love is all around, and that it takes many forms, not just romantic love. If *Cabaret* taught us that money makes the world go round, *Love Actually* reminds us that it's love that makes life worth living. You'd have to be a stone not to be moved by this creative reimagining and the onslaught of talent and emotion. Even if you're not a hopeless romantic, *Love Actually Live* leaves you with that warm feeling that in spite of all the negativity swirling around us, that everything's going to be alright, and that love will carry the day, and sometimes we need to be reminded of that essential truth.

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