

Film Review

The Stare of a Locked Cupboard

A review of *Judy* (2019) directed by Rupert Goold, Produced by David Livingstone, Screenplay by Tom Edge, Based on *End of the Rainbow* by Peter Quilter, starring Renée Zellweger, Finn Wittrock, Jessie Buckley, Rufus Sewell, Michael Gambon. Music by Gabriel Yared, Cinematography Ole Bratt Birkeland, Edited by Melanie Ann Oliver Production Company Pathe BBC Films Calamity Films BFI: *Jude*, released on 27 September 2019 (United States)

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The gaze on the eyes of the worn out actress is stern. It is shaky with vibrations from an overworked, sleepless past. Carrying a forced smile she tries to sway her loving audience. An audience which feeds on her personality like devouring a well dressed cake with a delicious frosting. But little does the audience know that if they take a bite from that cake, they will taste something sour in the center. The sweetness is just an escape.

The film opens with the nervous, wide-eyed, young Judy Garland (played by Darci Shaw) on the sets of 'The Wizard of Oz' in 1939, staring directly at us while the vicious Louis B. Mayer(played by Richard Cordery), the producer lurking in the shadows, advises her that if she were to quit her creative career, leave the sets and live a 'normal' life like all the other girls out there, she would be forgotten forever and swallowed up like a raindrop in the Pacific Ocean.

We turn the page to an older Judy in her 40s (played by Renée Zellweger), caressing her tired children, convincing them that everything is going to be fine. She tidies up her son's hair, while her daughter stands with a nervous gaze. We delve into the various fringes of Judy Garland's mind as a creative powerhouse, a kind compassionate soul and a mother yearning to tie up the loose ends of her life in the film *Judy* (2019) directed by Rupert Goold.

Trying to make her ends meet, she is the emancipated child of a tiresome past that has altered the way she functions and the way she goes to sleep. Fame always comes at a cost. Alcohol comes knocking at her door and she doesn't mind the swig as it helps ease the trauma of abuse inflicted upon her from her former producers, echoing the words 'Don't ever hold up a movie of mine!'. She hops parties in hopes of crashing at a place as she cannot afford a home and her loans have piled up, defeating her into debt. Her children stare at her helplessly

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while she hops cities with them, seeking help from anyone. In front of her children, she is forced to protect her self esteem by placing a veil of a joyous, confident, opaque persona above her true vulnerable self. In hopes of clearing her debts and reviving her career, she moves to London leaving her kids behind. Broken hearted but hiding her misery from the public, she manages to reach the safe haven of her hotel room in London. The foundation of plight, hope, loneliness and fear is laid, opening the doors to an intriguing narrative.

The film doesn't follow the conventional pattern of a non-fiction biopic. It cuts straight into the hard boiled slices of life that every mother, every woman and every performance artist journeys through. Tom Edge, the screenwriter, makes us look into the nooks and corners of Judy Garland's life at the most personal situations in indoor environments. The green room, where her insecurity coaxes her refusal to see her own reflections in the bulb-incarnated mirrors. The Picador hotel room in London, where the wall colours are so wildly opaque reflecting the lonely life she leads. The little red phone booth with foggy windows where she hides her sobs while her daughter on the line asks 'Are you there?'. The enjoying spectator doesn't realize that the same Dorothy Gale shaking her hands with her dog, Toto in *The Wizard of Oz*, while singing the lines 'Somewhere over the rainbow', has been sleepless for nights, hasn't had a decent meal since the start of the day, being forced to swallow pills as a result of forced capitalism over genuine nutrition. A capitalism of talent.

The advent of high budget studio films in Hollywood during the 1930s and 1940s saw the emergence of entertainment as a commodity. Capitalism had seeped its way into the entertainment 'business'. Actors, writers and many creative workers were exploited during this time to function like machines. Creativity was compromised and productivity was favoured. By this time pharmaceutical companies had developed so many disguised 'vitamin' tablets that people would take it to feel fresh and get back to work. This tablet was a devil in disguise as it would make these young actors so dependent on them that they would never be able to sleep without it later in their lives.

When we stare into the eyes of Renée Zellweger, we see a true artist, passionate and true to her work of art. She carries the aura of Judy Garland with grace and **eff**ortless composure. The light palpitations of her withdrawal symptoms, always appearing like the momentary flaps of bees' wings while hovering around flowers. A hidden force keeps pulling her back like she's a puppet being played by a puppet master, controlling her mind, confusing her to the point of making careless decisions. Each second she spends alone, her past grabs on to her.

Sometimes, being woken up on a pull out couch in a movie set by her demonic publicist. All that Judy can reminisce about when she grows old is the darkness of a lost childhood. Of 'what could've been'. The darkness of broken relationships, unpleasant awakenings and lost desires. Her ambitions are clouded as she grows older,

which is reminiscent of Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Birdman* (2014), where Micheal Keaton plays a struggling actor trying to resurrect his Broadway career while fantasizing about being a superhero. The only solace that she can find, her children, are away from her in America, as she arrives in London.

Judy is welcomed in London warmly by Rosalyn Wilder (played by Jessie Buckley), her personal assistant, who shows her around in the interiors of the Talk of The Town nightclub. Judy plans to sing her film songs for sold out shows at this club. When Judy meets Rosalyn for the first time she timidly asks 'How old are you?' and Rosalyn replies saying 'I am 28'. This moment is a culmination of Judy's deep reservoir of having lost her own meaning of age. The rumination continues in her mind as Rosalyn studies her, feeling for her and reading the mind of a restless aging performer shielding her glory. Seated on his chair, the crisply dressed pianist, Burt (played by Royce Pierreson), watches Judy enter the auditorium for a rehearsal and he blushes brightly. Judy observes the entire hall with its intimidating 4 tier seating, swallowing doubts of not being able to perform, hiding her nervousness with the brash attitude of a thespian singer, saying she doesn't need any rehearsals. Rosalyn reads the nervousness in her, anticipating that she will be late and sleepless for opening night on the next day. A jittery, sleepless and nervously choking Judy is pushed onto the stage the next night. To Rosalyn's shock, Judy unfurls magnificently into a bubble of energy, singing her heart out while an enthralling crowd watches. After the performance, her sleep still manages to escape her, pushing her back into misery. At moments her friend and lover, Mickey (played by Finn Wittrock), appears like a magician to cheer her up, promising her that he will strike a 'business deal' to gain custody of her children and clear her of her debts, but in vain.

After performing one night, things take a better turn when she runs into two of her ardent admirers, a gay couple. This is one of the most cherishable sequences in the film. She takes a pleasant stroll with them on the streets of London in hopes of searching for a restaurant to eat. As it is too late for any restaurant to be open, they invite her into their homes for a 'special' omelette and are in shock that 'THE Judy Garland' is dining with a bunch of meek citizens. 'People will hound you when you are different!', she tells Stan(played by Daniel Cerqueira) as he tears up at the piano, recalling the struggles of living as a queer couple in a cold ruthless world. That night she sleeps well, after having received genuine affection untouched by cruelty.

The background score and music by Gabriel Yared blends seamlessly into the moments of turmoil and search for hope, keeping a balanced tone throughout the entire film. At times, the silences are amplified to make us aware of the large empty spaces in Judy's mind. Renée Zellweger absorbs and reflects Judy Garland's mannerisms accurately, with the constant shaking of the head, moving sideways, avoiding any form of direct eye contact. She is constantly surrounded by an aura of uneasiness. She resembles a puzzle box who never wishes to be solved.

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Natalie Portman's portrayal of a struggling popstar in the film *Vox Lux* (2018) directed by Brady Corbet, comes to mind. Rosalyn's relationship with Judy evolves and we find comfort in Rosalyn's thoughtful, affectionate eyes. Rosalyn becomes our hero, always on the lookout for the nervous heroine in case of a breakdown. The viewer's gaze reciprocates with concern. Judy is pushed to her darkest depths but she yearns to hold on to the the last straw of hope with love and trust, untouched by her dull past. A past that makes her move away from her own childhood and protect the journey of her own descendents at all costs. The film becomes a medium for a metaphor of struggle, age and time through the life of Judy Garland, rather than treating her life as a mere example. *Judy* manages to underplay the 'example' card, and magnify moments of personal struggles that stay hidden in the cupboards of the minds of people who have taken fame to be their best friend for a while, early on in their lives.