

Ultimate post-911 feel-good holiday movie

Written by Richard Curtis

Directed by Richard Curtis

Hugh Grant ... The Prime Minister
Billy Bob Thornton ... The US President
Bill Nighy ... Billy Mack
Colin Firth ... Jamie Bennett
Liam Neeson ... Daniel
Emma Thompson ... Karen
Alan Rickman ... Harry
Kris Marshall ... Colin Frissell
Chiwetel Ejiofor ... Peter
Keira Knightley ... Juliet
Martine McCutcheon ... Natalie
Laura Linney ... Sarah
Lúcia Moniz ... Aurelia
Ivana Milicevic ... Stacey, American Dreamgirl
January Jones ... Jeannie, American Angel
Elisha Cuthbert ... Carol-Anne, American Goddess
Shannon Elizabeth ... Harriet, the sexy one
Denise Richards ... Carla, the real friendly one
Claudia Schiffer ... Carol

All you need is love. — The Beatles

You look at the IMDb entry for Love Actually and you think they must have spent a year assembling so large a cast of quite competent working actors from stage and screen—I swear there are 100+ names on the list—not to mention acquiring the services of all the stars. Anyway, regardless of how one feels about the acting profession, one has to hand it to all the beautiful people in this film for doing a first rate job in conveying a dozen separate love stories... not to mention kudos to the director for weaving them together so seamlessly.

Thus credit goes primarily to the director/writer, Richard Curtis, who has written such fine English fare as Four Weddings and a Funeral, Notting Hill, and Bridget Jones's Diary. On this occasion he also directs, and from the DVD extras we learn he was highly motivated to counter the negative energy from the 911 attacks —negative whether one believes the official conspiracy theory of 911 or the alternative conspiracy theory of 911. And Curtis sought to do so explicitly through the healing energies of love and music in the lives of real people. The soundtrack itself brings your spirit to a special place.

The movie begins with actual video footage taken at the Heathrow Airport arrival gates of people of all shapes, colors, and sizes embracing one another. The caring yet confident voice of Hugh Grant, playing the newly elected prime minister of England, fades in with words that prove to be the movie's overarching theme:

"Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think of the arrivals gate at Heathrow Airport. General opinion is starting to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed, but I don't see that. It seems to me that love is everywhere; often it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy, but it's always there. Fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, boy friends, girl friends, old friends. When the planes hit the Twin Towers, as far as I know, none of the phone calls from the people on board were messages of hate or revenge, they were all messages of love. If you look for it I've got a sneaky feeling you will actually find that love actually is all around."

Which sequences to the first vignette of "love," where a dissipated pop star Billy Mack (Bill Nighy) is trying unsuccessfully to sing a commercially modified version of "Love is All Around You." Keep in mind that the love in Love Actually, while generally romantic love, it's also written to cover the friendship and familyship sort of love that surrounds these romantic instances. We see the heartbreak of infidelity—or at least the inclination toward infidelity—, crushes between schoolchildren, unrequited love, sexually fulfilling love and love fulfilling sex, broken love, fixed love, a couple of stirring cases of true passionate love, and the anguish of love lost courtesy the Grim Reaper. And muskrat love.

In these days of seemingly politically correct nods to the gay love experience, I must confess personally to be glad Love Actually doesn't include a homosexual relationship in the mix. This exclusion doesn't mean the

writer/director is insensitive in the least to gays—in one scene Sarah (Laura Linney) kindly presuming, as I certainly did, that the best friend of the groom (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor, Gesundheit!) is gay, asks, "Do you love him?" Curtis includes a couple of additional conversational gestures toward sexual-orientation tolerance in his flick, which work well without preaching.

There's a less subtle political subtext in LA, which works equally fluently with the universal love theme: the prime minister David (Hugh Grant) is hosting the US president (Billy Bob Thornton) for a state visit. For the character of the president think of George Bush, loutish yet with an IQ elevated to 95. Thornton comes to town, does his "I am the decider" routine, expecting to "get everything we came here for" from the longsuffering codependent UK weak sister. Only the new single PM, inspired by his attraction to a young lady on his catering staff, behaves unexpectedly. To the delight of his countrymen, the PM stands up to the bullying president, at least symbolically—which I think speaks to our current reality of just saying NO... to American empire.

So if that's leftist-libertarian-liberal rant, let's make the most of it.

The political point certainly isn't heavy handed, more a skillful rapier thrust of wit into the heart of a malevolently unconscious 900-pound gorilla that nobody wants to confront directly. Realizing I've given a bit of the story away here (with the sympathetic treatment of the prime minister), let me just say that the nature of the Love Actually plot makes it difficult to spoil it. You have a dozen separate stories revolving about love; each of them has something unique to convey about the agonies and the ecstasies of that spiritual, emotional state.

A word about setting: The action (with the exception of one young man's flight to the States in search of willing American beauties) takes place in central London, with seemingly all the characters living within walking distance of one another. The architecture is a charming combination of old and modern, with the spaces arrayed cleverly with an enviable quality of "livability." (I'm sure the promenade on the River Thames serving as backdrop for several scenes is famous in international esthetic circles... circles I have yet to enter decisively. But it's, to use a word frequently uttered in the film, "lovely.")

Sure, these are the beautiful people in-crowd of London, reminds me of the social environment of *Friends* in Central Park, NY. And one sees how relatively well-accommodated everyone from the prime minister, to store clerks, to bagel guys seems to be: nothing of the exurban islands of trophy-home sterility we see around major cities in the US. Many Americans may envy breathing this air of neighborhood and community wafting along the well-kept cobblestones outside posh side-by-side condos. Whether this is an unrealistic picture of that place, I can't say, but I'd sure love to live in a vibrant, intelligent surrounding of human beings like this without the need for a car.

Love Actually has a wonderful sense of humor, and I am going to tell one of the "love" stories to illustrate it [1/12 of a spoiler alert]: the Colin Frissell (Kris Marshall) story. Colin is the bagel guy who reckons he is not getting any action with English women, because they're all stuck up. So he tells his friend, "I'm going to America. At any bar in America there will be 10 gorgeous women who will want to have sex with me." On which, of course, his friend tosses a very wet blanket. But Colin is headstrong and committed to his belief, so he sells his stuff and buys a plane ticket to Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

That's right, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In a wintry scene after he's arrived at the Milwaukee airport, he hails a cab and tells the driver he wants to go to a bar. "What kind of bar?" the cabby asks. "Any bar, just an average American bar," Colin replies. He enters the establishment and orders a Budweiser, "King of Beers." Then his (and every other guy's) wildest fantasy unfolds: he winds up laughing and talking and drinking shots and beers with four of the hottest, friendliest coeds this side of Hollywood and they invite him to share their one bed that night so long as he's okay with the fact, "we can't even afford pajamas, that's right... we would be naked."

And it gets better! Tongue-in-cheek message: live your dream.

There's so much density of entertainment value in this movie, I could go on for days: With respect to music, I'll just mention that Kelly Clarkson's *The Trouble with Love* is played once during the movie and then regales you as the credits flow at the end. The only reason I don't give the movie 10 stars is people would think I'm too sentimental.

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