

LAST CHANCE HARVEY

Change-of-life film, hope of fall romance __ 6.5/10

Screenplay by Joel Hopkins

Directed by Joel Hopkins

Dustin Hoffman ... Harvey Shine

Emma Thompson ... Kate Walker

Eileen Atkins ... Maggie Walker

Kathy Baker ... Jean

Liane Balaban ... Susan

James Brolin ... Brian

Richard Schiff ... Marvin

Kate Walker: I'm not gonna do it, because it'll hurt! Sometime or other there'll be, you know, "It's not working." Or, "I need my space." Or whatever it is, and it will end, and it will hurt, and I won't do it.

Not sure whose idea the film was, but it does serve as a decent vehicle for the perfect-pitch acting of two icons of the screen: Dustin Hoffman (Harvey Shine)—a seven-time Oscar nominee/twice winner (Kramer vs. Kramer and Rain Man)—and Emma Thompson—a four-time Oscar nominee/twice winner (Howard's End and Sense and Sensibility). Interestingly, the Oscar Thompson won for Sense and Sensibility was for best screenplay. (!)

I wish Emma had tried her hand at writing Last Chance Harvey instead of the 39-year-old, essentially first-time film-writer/director Joel Hopkins. It's easy enough to be a critic, but I wonder what the producers were thinking lining up a, frankly, noninspiring UK literary and directorial rookie to hook up with such big talents as Hoffman and Thompson. My take is the writing is at least all right—it comes from the heart and rings authentic from Hopkins' obvious familiarity with the characters' life situations. But the directing is, well, muddled on occasion.

It's not necessary to pick out all the peccadilloes. (Hey, I just had the thought, perhaps Joel is related to Anthony Hopkins? That would explain him going to the front of the line.) Let me simply point out the single most annoying part of the movie for me: Kate Walker's (Emma Thompson's) mother, Maggie (Eileen Atkins), takes up way too many frames. Maggie lives with Kate, who is an unmarried woman seemingly headed toward forever-singleness. Maggie's character is baffling... one isn't sure if Mama is an invalid, senile, or a randy ol' lady who lusts after the Polish butcher next door.

We also get mixed cues regarding who's still young enough to "want to" or too old to be bothered... especially when it comes to Kate's mother. Mama seems ambivalent regarding Kate's romantic feelings. Is Kate worried about offending her mother by going out, or is Kate supposed to fling herself at anything in trousers to land a permanent guy? It's as if the writer/director could not make up his mind that the mother and daughter are supposed to be 60 and 40, respectively, or 70 and 50. (70 and 50 are much closer to the actresses' reality.)

No big deal. Roger Ebert's review tackles a few more of the basic problems with the writing/direction, pointing out a couple of scenes that I agree were, well, unnecessary to say the least. Yet ol' Rog finds enough warmth and merit in the principals to give the film a 3-star rating (out of 4). And that's basically how I feel about the movie.

The character setting

It's going to be a stretch for John Q. American to identify with Harvey Shine. He's a New York musician whose youthful ambition was to play jazz piano professionally, but his career has instead found him writing jingles for television ads. Which brings in plenty of money and sets up his family in that New York-to-London artistic social strata, where many of the dependents on such wealth regard it as a birthright... to go to the right schools, to have the right relationships, to know the right people, to be seen in the right society pages, and so on.

Harvey's wife Jean (Kathy Baker) and daughter Susan (Liane Balaban) do an excellent job of pegging out the superficiality meter... though toward the end of the movie they tone it down some. I certainly know family situations like this, where the poor-schmuck breadwinner dad is simply too square or too socially inept to be tolerated by the posturing, airhead women whose entire material existence depends on his Herculean efforts. Often those efforts require that he spend long hours at thankless tasks away, particularly, from his offspring.

And here comes the guilt... the relentless "poor me's" raining down on the sap until he's exhausted and the mother can self-righteously move up to a richer guy, preferably with inherited wealth so he can spend most of the day doting on her. In the movie James Brolin is Husband #2, and he plays it well. The daughter is a little snob who finds a nice, rich (or at least potentially rich) British boy to put up with her needful ways. But with the daughter, because she's so immature, there is hope. And she and Harvey, despite Jean's second marriage to Doofus, still have inklings of a solid father-daughter connection.

The question is whether that love will become nourished and fulfilled during the awkward solo trip by Harvey to London for daughter Susan's wedding. First signs are not too good. Poor Harvey takes it in the cojones once again, and wanders in his rejection to Heathrow Airport where he plans to take a plane back to New York. His work was to have required he miss the reception[1], but suddenly that reason is no longer real. Enter Kate Walker, who works at Heathrow doing government surveys. Harvey blew Kate off when he first arrived, but now he notices.

Here's where the love story kicks in. It has a lot of promise, too. At this point I am totally pulling for ol' Harv, I feel his pain. And I feel his relief at running into a woman who seems, well, normal. On the other side, until she's actually with Harvey, Kate doesn't seem nearly so sympathetic in dealing with that cinematic hodgepodge that is her relationship with her mother. But the writing and directing—and acting—while Harvey and Kate are together make wonderful music. He becomes, thru her help, what it means to be a man, and she becomes, thru his help, what it means to be a woman. And I mean that in the conventional old-fashioned sense.

But particularly with Harvey, by golly, he comes to assert himself. He grows in self-confidence, knowing Kate is what he's been missing. She, too, asserts her legitimate desires for a man. Again, some of this is a stretch in the ol' testosterone and estrogen department, because Hoffman is 71 and Thompson is 50. The movie makes a lot more sense if Harvey is 55-ish and Kate is 35-ish, because those seem to be the ages for which Hopkins wrote it.

Still, they manage the best they can, probably better than any other acting pair those ages. And even if their characters are supposed to be younger, the dialog is intelligent

and their affair makes enough sense older. As Roger Ebert indicates, it seems whenever the duo are getting close to deep thoughts and feelings, the director effects a semi-obligatory lyrical interlude (OLI)... a dilatory sequence of lighter behavior.

But then the dialogue fades down, and the camera pulls back and shows them talking and smiling freely, and the music gets happier, and there is a montage showing them walking about London with lots and lots of scenery in the frame. The movie indulges the Semi-OLI more than once; it uses the device as shorthand for scenes that should be fully transcribed. — from Ebert's review

So nobody's perfect.

All in all a moderately inspiring and entertaining film. I do want to mention one scene that was particularly effective, but I don't want to give it away either. Let's just say, during Susan's reception—which Kate convinces Harvey he needs to attend—Kate decides for one reason or another that she's going to split. The form and manner of Harvey's appeal to keep her there is most cool.

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[1] Harvey is a little bit of a schmuck, but again I can't imagine—from a writing/directing point of view—how any man (Harvey in particular) would not insist on being part of his daughter's entire wedding day... regardless of how bitchy she might act on the surface.

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Last Chance Harvey | Dustin Hoffman | Emma Thompson | Joel Hopkins