

TV Review: HBO's Disappointing 'Hemingway & Gellhorn' with Clive Owen, Nicole Kidman

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on May 28, 2012 - 10:00am

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CHICAGO – It pains me to say this — HBO's "Hemingway & Gellhorn" is a complete mess, a film littered with awful directorial decisions, built on a misguided screenplay, and featuring performances that range from mediocre to downright horrendous. I'm as big a cheerleader for HBO and their line of original films as you're likely to find but this is one of the worst.



TV Rating: 1.5/5.0

It's not merely that I so often love what HBO delivers (their current Sunday line-up of "Game of Thrones," "Girls," and "Veep" is one of the best two-hour blocks of television in years) but that the cast, crew, and subject matter of this 154-minute epic seems tailor made for me. I would say that Ernest Hemingway's work is one of the reasons that I became an English major in college and that director Philip Kaufman's "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" helped make me a film nut. Clive Owen is one of our most underrated actors and Nicole Kidman is perfect in the right material (which it seems like this would be). I'm even a sucker for "old-fashioned" filmmaking, the kind of epic made with grand gestures, melodrama, and cheesy dialogue that seemed more tolerable in cinema of fifty years ago. And yet I hated "Hemingway & Gellhorn" from the first ten minutes and the rest just became an experiment in torture.



Hemingway and Gellhorn

Photo credit: HBO

Ernest Hemingway (Owen) and Martha Gellhorn (Kidman) met in 1936 at a bar called Sloppy Joe's in Key West, FL. He was already a legend,

the kind of man's man who would walk into a Florida bar still covered in the guts of the sea creature he had to wrangle off his line. He's in a marriage to a woman (Nicole Kidman) who clearly doesn't feed his passion like the lovely, sophisticated woman he flirts with at the bar. And so when Gellhorn becomes a war correspondent for Collier's and Hemingway tags along on a trip to the frontlines of the Spanish Civil War, romance is inevitable.



Hemingway and Gellhorn
Photo credit: HBO

Hemingway is there to help his friends — John Dos Passos (David Strathairn), Joris Iven (Lars Ulrich), and Robert Capa (Santiago Cabrera) — make a film about the fight against Fascism and the lead-up to World War II. A large chunk of the film takes place in Spain. As bombs fall, Hemingway and Gellhorn fall into bed with each other (in surprisingly graphic sex scenes) and find kindred spirits in each other. They are both passionate for that in which they believe and their passion fuels one another (to the point that Gellhorn even inspired "For Whom the Bell Tolls"). After their time covering the War, they settle down in Cuba but Gellhorn feels empowered to cover conflicts in the increasingly tumultuous world and Hemingway was never a man who would do well when left by himself. Their relationship suffers and when a trip to China brands them potential traitors, Hemingway basically implodes.

And that's really just the surface of the long, complex plot of "Hemingway & Gellhorn," a film that seems designed to paint a portrait of two people who were surprisingly on the forefront of one of the most important times in world history. From Spain to Germany to Cuba to Russia to China, "Hemingway & Gellhorn" illustrates how complex the world was in the '30s and '40s and how two people looking for extreme adventure could pretty easily find it, especially when one of them was one of the most beloved writers of his generation.

While this narrative approach allows for some interesting social and political undertones, it doesn't allow for much character or romance. The relationship between the two title characters, which so desperately needs to be the foundation of the film, reeks of melodrama and false emotion. I never once cared about either Hemingway or Gellhorn and couldn't give a damn if they ended up together or not. Their passion isn't genuine. Their love doesn't feel real. They have no chemistry.



Hemingway and Gellhorn
Photo credit: HBO

Part of the blame for that is a film that keeps the viewer constantly disengaged from the action on a human level. Let's count the bad production decisions: 1.) Having a husky-voiced, heavily made-up Kidman narrate the piece as if Gellhorn was remembering it all in detailed flashback. 2.) Making it look like the film is changing stock to old newsreel footage constantly, sometimes even in the middle of a scene, to the point of distraction (seriously, this is one of the most misguided directorial decisions I've seen in YEARS in film or TV). 3.) Having a contest of bad accents as Lars Ulrich, Tony Shalhoub, and Robert Duvall seem to do in one scene. 4.) Allowing Owen, typically such a great actor, to play Hemingway as bluster and snarl instead of a real character. (Corey Stoll's Big Papa in "Midnight in Paris" was VASTLY superior). 5.) Never finding the right tone — is this romance, epic, political statement, action film, war movies, etc.?

Tonally inconsistent, poorly directed (and that's hard for me to say given my love for some of Kaufman's work), and structurally flawed, "Hemingway & Gellhorn" is just a mess. If Kaufman and his team had embraced something — make it a grand epic of romantic, melodramatic proportions and I would have gone with it — instead of trying to have it all, they wouldn't have ended up with so little.

"Hemingway & Gellhorn" stars Clive Owen, Nicole Kidman, David Strathairn, Tony Shalhoub, Rodrigo Santoro, Molly Parker, Joan Chen, Parker Posey, Robert Duvall, Jeffrey Jones, Peter Coyote, and Lars Ulrich. It was written by Jerry Stahl & Barbara Turner and directed by Philip Kaufman. It premieres on HBO on Monday, May 28, 2012 at 8pm CST.



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