

Blu-ray Review: 'Hope Springs' Mars Great Acting with Awful Soundtrack

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CHICAGO – Meryl Streep and Tommy Lee Jones are actors capable of conveying a richly layered inner life without uttering a single word. They have a miraculous method of making silence speak volumes. It's in the lingering pauses and sudden hesitations between words where the story truly resides. I can't picture two actors better suited to work together onscreen.

Unfortunately, David Frankel's "Hope Springs" is the wrong vehicle for this extraordinary pair. It tackles frank and uncomfortable subject matter in the safest and most sanitized way possible, complete with PG-13-rated innuendo and an insultingly awful assemblage of manipulative pop tunes. Why bother making a film about and for adults if you intend on dumbing it down for mainstream multiplexes?



Blu-ray Rating: **3.0/5.0**

The first twenty minutes or so of "Springs" are over-saturated with such annoying on-the-nose lyrics that they may tempt many viewers to switch the film off well before it starts getting interesting. With their three-decade-old marriage falling into the rut of passionless routines, Kay (Streep) and Arnold (Jones) are in great need of a reignited spark. Yet while Arnold seems content in (or, perhaps, resigned to) sleeping in front of his usual golf programming before heading off to his separate bedroom, Kay is becoming increasingly restless. She fears that her husband's indifference to their nonexistent sex life is indicative of the fact that he no longer finds her attractive. Both actors are so good at conveying the awkwardness of their increasingly frail connection that they render the incessant soundtrack entirely unnecessary. Nevertheless, when Kay browses through naughty books in a desperate move to get more out of her relationship, she's accompanied by Ingrid Michaelson's "More, More, More." When Kay drags a grouchy Arnold to a week of marriage therapy in the impossibly sun-drenched village of Great Hope Springs, a song marks the beginning of "Another Day." When an early session with kindly Dr. Feld (an uncharacteristically serene Steve Carell) is derailed by Arnold's endless complaints, Kay's breakdown is drowned out by the lyrics, "Let me cry for a change!" while Arnold wanders off to the rhythm of "Everybody Plays the Fool." By the time Annie Lennox's "Why" started wailing over the climax, I was rooting for Arnold to poke his head out the window and shout, "Will you turn that music down?!"



Hope Springs was released on Blu-ray and DVD on December 4th, 2012.

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

The fact that “Springs” is still worth seeing is a testament to the strength of the three central performances, particularly that of Jones, who cuts through his stodgy deadpan persona with glimmers of startling vulnerability, as he did in Steven Spielberg’s “Lincoln.” When Arnold recalls his impressions of Kay upon seeing her for the first time, Jones appears to be on the verge of tears. It becomes clear that his character is so haunted by the past that he has trouble with accepting the present. His scenes with Streep are alternately funny and heartbreaking, but the dialogue in their therapy sessions opt for palatable generalizations rather than candid details (they make Ben Lewin’s “The Sessions” look like X-rated fare). The upbeat finale, scored to Lenny Kravitz’s “It Ain’t Over ‘Til It’s Over,” also feels like a cop-out, as if screenwriter Vanessa Taylor decided to disregard the multiple weaknesses in her characters’ damaged bond in order to deliver a tidy happy ending. Audiences are guaranteed to leave feeling reasonably happy yet more than a little unfulfilled.

“Hope Springs” is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.40:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English and French audio tracks and includes a director commentary track where Frankel admits that the film’s title was chosen because of its supposed marketability (apparently, that’s how he chose the soundtrack as well). What really makes this disc worth recommending is the excellent 17-minute gallery of alternate takes. For acting buffs, it’s thrilling to observe the variety of line readings Streep and Jones delivered during production, and how a single nuance or extended beat could give entirely new meaning to the dialogue (there’s also a hilarious moment where Streep has Kay mispronounce ESPN). One of the best decisions Frankel made was avoiding rehearsals in order to make the character’s interactions feel especially fresh (several of the first takes were used in the final cut). In terms of collaborating with actors, Frankel is the right director for an actress like Streep (he also helmed “The Devil Wears Prada”). Hopefully for their next collaboration, he’ll abandon any song designed to inform the audience about how they should feel at any given moment. That’s what actors are for.

‘Hope Springs’ is released by Sony Pictures Home Entertainment and stars Meryl Streep, Tommy Lee Jones and Steve Carell. It was written by Vanessa Taylor and directed by David Frankel. It was released on December 4th, 2012. It is rated PG-13.

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