

Blu-ray Review: Naggingly Hollow ‘Hemingway and Gellhorn’ Falls Flat

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on April 11, 2013 - 1:30pm

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CHICAGO – It doesn’t sound like a particularly bad idea. In exploring the globe-trotting adventures of author Ernest Hemingway and war correspondent Martha Gellhorn, why not use archival footage of the actual sights and sounds that they encountered, while nesting the actors into the frame, a la “Forrest Gump”? I didn’t think it was a bad idea at all until roughly three minutes into the movie.

Suddenly the picture fades into a grainy blue haze as Hemingway (Clive Owen) is witnessed on his fishing boat, pulling in his latest big catch with cavalier bravado. The moment is supposed to function as a stirring introduction to his character, but it’s completely undermined by the jarringly amateurish special effects juxtaposing the actors against a green screen projecting old footage of a jarring sea (even the splashes of water seem superimposed). Considering the often stellar production values of HBO films, it’s little wonder why Philip Kaufman’s “Hemingway & Gellhorn” received such a tepid response from audiences.



Blu-ray Rating: **2.0/5.0**

If the effects were the sole flaw in this ambitious misfire, it may have been at least partially salvaged by the strength of its fascinating human subjects, but the script by Jerry Stahl (“Bad Boys II”) and Barbara Turner (“Pollock”) fails to investigate the genius of either iconic writer. Instead, it exploits their stormy love affair for a series of soft-core interludes, none of which are as preposterous as the scene where Hemingway and Gellhorn (Nicole Kidman) make love during a fiery attack, as their bodies become caked in the debris of their crumbling bedroom. I suppose this is meant to convey that chaos serves as a turn-on for both compulsive risk-takers, but this is one of many ideas the film acknowledges without ever adequately exploring. For its interminable 155-minute running time, Kaufman’s film skims through various exotic locales (all shot on a San Francisco backlot) visited by the couple, while Hemingway maintains his reliable status as a chauvinistic brute. It’s difficult to determine precisely what Gellhorn learned from Hemingway, aside from his motto to keep writing even in the most dire of circumstances. A distracting array of big names pepper the ensemble, each given precisely one note to play. David Strathairn frets and flits about, Parker Posey cackles and warbles in her trademark role of The Unwanted Woman, and Tony Shalhoub camps it up as a Russian journalist who resembles a sinister Max Weinberg. It’s hard to care about what’s happening at any given moment, since the melodrama rings every bit as hollow as the pasted-on backdrops.



Hemingway and Gellhorn was released on Blu-ray and DVD on April 2nd, 2013.

Photo credit: HBO Home Entertainment

There are exactly two things I liked about the picture. One is Kidman's performance as the aged Gellhorn, proving that she can indeed undergo a remarkable transformation when the role demands it, as in "The Hours." The stiff prosthetics are less than impressive, but Kidman captures the woman's weariness and resilient strength in countless little details, such as the way she causes a journalist to flee her room without raising her voice, as well as her unrecognizably low-toned voice. The other highlight of the film is its gloriously old-fashioned score by Javier Navarrete ("Pan's Labyrinth") which lends the script's central romance an epic scope that it never achieves on its own.

"Hemingway & Gellhorn" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.78:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English, French and Spanish audio tracks, and is available in a Blu-ray/DVD combo pack. Extras include a commentary track with Kaufman and editor Walter Murch, and two featurettes that provide a backstage view of the botched effects.

'Hemingway and Gellhorn' is released by HBO Home Entertainment and stars Nicole Kidman, Clive Owen, David Strathairn, Rodrigo Santoro, Tony Shalhoub, Molly Parker, Parker Posey, Peter Coyote, Joan Chen and Robert Duvall. It was written by Jerry Stahl and Barbara Turner and directed by Philip Kaufman. It was released on April 2nd, 2013. It is rated TV-MA.



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