

Judi Dench Checks Into ‘The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on May 4, 2012 - 2:28pm

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Seven desperate souls are taking risks to save some part of their world, which describes both “The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel” and “The Avengers.” Which will win the box office war? The “heroes” of the Marigold residence include Judi Dench, Tom Wilkerson, Bill Nighy, Maggie Smith and Dev Patel.

The slight story relies on often seen clichés in golden-ager movie mode – man crazy and lonely widows, a horny old man, a used up marriage, a redeemed curmudgeon – but luckily these are filtered through top drawers actors who heighten the stereotypes into something more. This is a film that tries too hard with its message and premise, and is a bit overlong, but has its heart in the right place. It ends up being time well spent with the characters themselves, because of the precise performances in their various journeys.

Seven persons in retirement are at a crossroads, and the signs point in the same direction – a dull remainder of life in cold Britain. Evelyn (Judi Dench) has just lost her husband, Graham (Tom Wilkerson) is a retiring magistrate, Norman (Ronald Pickup) is a randy old goat, Madge (Celia Imrie) is searching for another husband, Muriel (Maggie Smith) is a candidate for a hip replacement and a married couple (Bill Nighy as Douglas and Penelope Wilton as Jean) are finding their golden years are turning to rust. They are decide to “outsource” their retirements, signing up to live at the Marigold Hotel in Udalpur, India.



Judi Dench (Evelyn), Tom Wilkerson (Graham) and Bill Nighy (Douglas) in ‘The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel’
Photo credit: Ishika Mohan for Fox Searchlight Pictures

The hotel turns out to be a dump, a last ditch effort by Sonny (Dev Patel of “Slumdog Millionaire”) to turn his fortunes around. The retirees all have their reasons for being there, and set out to understand what those reasons will give them in their new locale. It works out, for example, that Evelyn gets employed at the same call center as Sonny’s girlfriend Sunaina (Teria Desae), and Graham starts searching for his past, having lived in the teeming city in his youth. All of the “golden souls” will be changed by their stay at the Marigold, whether they want to or not.

The film is anchored by the always luminous Dench, who brings a sense of poignancy to the routine of the lonely old widow. And that can be said for the rest of the cast. The exotic setting aside, the overall story has unlikely moments that are not so compelling, but the performances make the material that much better. Tom Wilkerson makes some slight gestures, for example, that hint toward a hidden desperation. Maggie Smith takes a repellent wheelchair-bound bigot and reveals the sadness behind the life. Dev Patel is an eager-to-please native of India, and twists that typical character into somewhat of an optimistic philosopher.

The three lesser known actors, interestingly enough, hold up their plights competently next to Dench, Wilkerson, and Smith. It’s as if they were challenged in the opportunity. Penelope Wilton, as the close-minded and shrewish wife opposite the always fine Bill Nighy, really knows how to crush his spirit without destroying it, even when the character is given mostly negative scenes. Ronald Pickup – a great actor name, considering his character – and Celia Imrie, as the representatives of old age loneliness, both have their agendas and clearly communicate them. The way these characters are expanded is the best part of the movie.

The adapted script by Ol Parker, based on a novel by Deborah Moggach, is full of cutesy asides and dialogue that comes off more as a India-based fable than full-fledged character metamorphosis – and it takes too much time in letting it play out. While that chips away at the effectiveness of the movie, again it is the righteousness of the performances that saves the narrative, and keeps it above the surface of cliché. Part of that credit must go to director John Madden (“Shakespeare in Love,” “The Debt”) who knows how to handle ensemble casts, and tries to get the best out of every moment.



Penelope Wilton (Jean) Seeks Sanctuary in ‘The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel’
Photo credit: Ishika Mohan for Fox Searchlight Pictures

The country of India is a also a nicely drawn character in the proceedings. As the Brits are overwhelmed with the teeming population at virtually every turn, it is Wilkerson’s character that reminds everyone, “there is always room in India.” The supporting native cast adds that expansive spice, with a balance between the old world of the caste system and the modern one of the ubiquitous call center.

It is a proper film business that still has room for a adult-type drama in the midst of a comic book movie weekend. In their own powerful way, these seven “avengers” of a certain age have come to the rescue in their own part of the cinematic world.

“The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel” opens everywhere on May 4th. Featuring Judi Dench, Tom Wilkerson, Bill Nighy, Penelope Wilton, Maggie Smith, Ronald Pickup, Celia Imrie and Dev Patel. Screenplay adapted by Ol Parker. Directed by John Madden. Rated “PG-13”



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