Meryl Streep, Tommy Lee Jones Elevate 'Hope Springs'

Submitted by **PatrickMcD** [1] on August 6, 2012 - 9:29am

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Rating: **3.5**/5.0

CHICAGO – It can be argued that Meryl Streep is in the most fruitful period in her long and illustrious career, at least as far as the variety of character parts she has undertaken. She co-stars in "Hope Springs" with Tommy Lee Jones, as a mousy Omaha wife who is looking for a change in her marriage.

Streep does an artful balancing act in the film, because she does love her husband, but is desperate to make a change in how they meander into their 31st anniversary. She again is the most notable performance, playing a generally shy woman who is risking a lot to assert herself. The story is a bit choppy and cloying at times, and unfortunately relies on a star system predictability, but still manages to entertain simply through the performances of the two strong lead actors.

Kay (Meryl Streep) has a routine in her Omaha, Nebraska household. She and her husband Arnold (Tommy Lee Jones) are empty nesters, and now sleep in separate rooms. She makes the same breakfast for him every morning, they discuss the same topics – what will be for dinner that evening – and Jones returns each evening from his job as a tax accountant to fall asleep in front of the TV. The sameness of this existence is taking a toll on Kay.

Kay (Meryl Streep) Contemplates Her Next Move in 'Hope Springs'
Photo credit: Barry Wetcher for Columbia Pictures

She suggests a marriage counselor named Dr. Feld (Steve Carell), and the couple must travel to a coastal city in Maine to have a week long session with him. Arnold resists at first, but when Kay defiantly says she will go no matter what, he decides to accompany her. What transpires

is frank discussion over marital and sexual circumstances that have long been buried, and the consequence of their actions will begin a new evolution in their relationship.

It's wonderful just to observe Meryl Streep, in the way she embraces her character and works out how to communicate a person like Kay. Many of the elements of the Kay persona is not in the screenplay, but in the way Streep carries herself and in the hesitation in Kay's manner, she reveals the desperate wife. It's a pleasure to watch those tics, and observe the slow blossoming of a archetype American couple through Kay's actions.

Tommy Lee Jones is a bit more in his "movie character" – think tough and plain talking – which makes his marital and sexual confessions all the more contrary. Breaking routines of many years, especially in a marriage, is a monumental task. The Arnold character is not conducive to this change, and it is fascinating to see how his personality tries different tactics, even when the result it may not be the right step. In many ways, it's one of Jones's bravest roles.

The casting of Steve Carell as Dr. Feld may be the most perplexing element of the film, as it seems anyone could have played the part, and with Carell's comic character lurking in the background, his performance seemed pinched. Most likely he took the role to act with Streep and Jones, who wouldn't want to put that on their resume? But Carell seems so eager to create this nebulous character, that it comes off as one note. Acting with Streep and Jones? Check it off your bucket list, Michael Scott.

Arnold (Tommy Lee Jones) and Kay Seek Counsel from Dr. Feld (Steve Carell) in 'Hope Springs'
Photo credit: Barry Wetcher for Columbia Pictures

Television writer Vanessa Taylor wrote the screenplay, and it comes off a bit choppy, probably due to some editing circumstances. Director David Frankel ("The Devil Wears Prada," "Marley & Me") handles the three person counseling sessions fairly well, so they don't seem stagey, but he has lost the spark that was so apparent in the "Devil" film. His films since then are clean and bright, but have none of the background edge that the fashion world lent him, versus a dog movie, a bird watching movie ("The Big Year" in 2011) and now marriage counseling.

However, this film rises and falls on the fortunes of Streep and Jones, so in this narrative it mostly rises, despite a certain predictability in the end. Besides, when did you ever think you'd see a movie with Meryl Streep simulating a certain carnal act? Talk about your hope springing.

 "Hope Springs" opens everywhere August 8th. Featuring Meryl Streep, Tommy Lee Jones, Steve Carell, Jean Smart, Mimi Rogers and Elizabeth Shue. Screenplay by Vanessa Taylor. Directed by David Frankel. Rated "PG-13"

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