

Jane Rolls Over Again for Wretched ‘Austenland’

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Rating: **1.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – One of the most incorrect assumptions in literature iconography is the focus on Jane Austen as a purely romantic writer – skipping the depth of character, humor and cynicism in her work, for the sake of mooning over “Mr. Darcy.” The new film “Austenland” continues this trend.

This is adapted from a novel that no one evidently should read, from screenwriters Jerusha Hess (“Napoleon Dynamite,” “Gentleman Broncos”) and the source novelist Shannon Hale. It would be a great relief to present Jane Austen to them, Marshall-McCluhan-in-Annie-Hall style, and have the legend say, “you know nothing of my work.” Co-opting the great author’s name for this dull and terrible exercise in “romance” is a travesty in story woven justice. The filmmakers may counter that it’s all in fun, but there is nothing fun about taking one element of an author’s good works, and creating a “theme park” imaging of it, with one dead joke after another. There is more humor in one chapter of “Pride and Prejudice” than the whole of “Austenland,” even unintentionally.

Keri Russell is Jane Hayes (yes, they named her as such), a thirtysomething editor that moons over the 18th century atmosphere of Jane Austen’s books – her apartment is a virtual shrine to the author. When another relationship goes south on her, she decides to chuck it all and take a huge risk. She’s going to use her meager savings to attend “Austenland,” an immersion camp in Britain that’s themed to take their visitors inside the world of Jane Austen.



Taking Flight: Jane (Keri Russell) and Martin (Bret McKenzie) in ‘Austenland’

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

This includes performers at the camp portraying the archetypes of Austen's novels. There is Mr. Henry Nobley (JJ Feild), Colonel Andrews (James Callis) and the host Mrs. Wattlesbrook (Jane Seymour). Besides Jane Hayes, another camper is Miss Elizabeth Charming (Jennifer Coolidge) – a brassy, man hungry divorcee who seems to know more about Lindsay Lohan than Elizabeth Bennet. Can this theme experience match up to real thing, a little romance?

In a word, no. By focusing on only this one theme – an element that is present in Austen's literature, but not the only element – the story sucks all the attempts at romance dry from the proceedings. That is the danger of the one-trick pony, thematically it can work for the first couple of introductions, but repeating only romantic comedy verbiage invites tomatoes to be thrown at it. The actors in the film get almost desperate to get through it, there is no energy in this formulaic situation. This unfortunately leaves Jennifer Coolidge to do her middle-aged-horny-woman act, which jumped the shark five "American Pie" movies ago.

This film also answers the question, whatever happened to Keri "Felicity" Russell? Okay, she's done steady work since then, but it is hard pressed to recognize any development in the older ingenue she's trying to pull off in the film. Her persona is too cool to be comedic, and the part screams for an actor who knows a little bit about timing. All the other unknown supporting cast are wall papering, even well known Jane Seymour (in a thankless role). It is rather amusing to experience Bret McKenzie (one of two members of the Flight of the Concorde band) playing a idealistic stable boy, amusing because he's so miscast.

This is the first time for Jerusha Hess in the director's chair. She is the wife of Jared Hess, and the co-writer with him on the classics he directed, "Napoleon Dynamite," "Nacho Libre" and "Gentleman Broncos." Why she couldn't inject some of the respectable goofiness of those screenplays into this corpse narrative is beyond repair – was she that handcuffed by the source novel? There was no wit in this, just a series of idiot plot abuse.



Lady Overact: Miss Charming (Jennifer Coolidge) and Jane Hayes in 'Austenland'
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

What continues to invite irony is the fact that the real Jane Austen lived her life as an observer, not a participant in romance. As she commented through her characters on the outside of that spectrum, she would have no doubt scoffed at the notion of creating a theme park with her name and literary cache attached. But who could have predicted the 21st Century from the early 19th, and who could have known that a shorthand for the description of her prose would just be "romantic," mostly based on other interpretations? "Austenland" is a sad but true example of that limiting perception.

"It is a truth universally acknowledged..." that a popular author in the public domain is ripe for exploitation. Jane Austen gets to roll over in her tomb once again, cursed forevermore with the tide of crass, anti-artistic larceny, represented through her good name.

"Austenland" continues its limited release in Chicago on August 23rd. Featuring Keri Russell, Jennifer Coolidge, JJ Feild, Bret McKenzie and Jane Seymour. Screenplay adapted by Jerusha Hess and Shannon Hale. Directed by Jerusha Hess. Rated "PG-13"



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