

‘The Upside’ Works Because of Kevin Hart & Bryan Cranston

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – In 2011, there was a notable French film called “The Intouchables,” based on the true story of quadriplegic Phillippe Pozzo di Borgo and the relationship with his caregiver. Leave it to the U.S. film industry to get its sticky fingers on the story, and seven years later Bryan Cranston portrays “Phillip” and his caretaker is portrayed by Kevin Hart. Instead of story, this version relies on its lead actors.

Intuitively and entertainment-wise, there is nothing wrong with the transformation. In the French version, the caregiver Driss is a poor immigrant in Paris. With Kevin Hart, renamed “Dell,” he’s an ex-con trying to reconnect with his son, who lives in public housing. Naturally, the role is rewired to exploit Hart’s comedic tics, but he does as much dramatic acting and pulls it off. Cranston is his usual competent self portraying Phillip... he understands the pathos of his situation, and pines for his late wife. The film both rises and falls on its two lead actors, but mostly rises, and is a decent story of two men overcoming their handicaps.

Dell (Kevin Hart) has just been released from prison and is back in his Bronx neighborhood, and is trying to stay away from the element that got him locked up in the first place. This involves finding a job, which he is not keen to do, despite having a son and child support to pay to the mother of the child. He prefers to do some interviews and have the businesses sign off on his parole form.



Dell (Kevin Hart) and Phillip (Bryan Cranston) in 'The Upside'

Photo credit: STX Entertainment

This accidentally gets him into a swank building in New York City, and the penthouse apartment of Phillip (Bryan Cranston), a billionaire hedge funder who was paralyzed from the neck down after a para-sailing accident. Of all the caregiver applicants, Phillip sees something in Dell that spurs his interest, and he hires the inexperienced ex-con. The relationship will change both their lives.

Interestingly enough, Nicole Kidman is also in the film, as Phillip's business associate. She plays a supporting role that could have gone to any character actor... her presence is surprising. The whole story, since I've seen "The Intouchables," is sharply "Americanized," in the sense of less grit (actually doing caregiving stuff) and more feel-goodism. But even in that context it isn't bad, just different, and the two leads are charming enough to take it in that direction.

Bryan Cranston, in his move from struggling young character actor to middle-aged leading man, does the best with his character. His Phillip is an overwrought man ready to die, while his wealth has a number of people around him who does not want that event to occur (not because of money, but love). It's unfortunate that there was not enough depth in the Phillip/Dell relationship to really get to the bottom of his depression, a huge issue with persons in his situation. The film was content to allow Hart's natural energy to drive the transformation.



Dell, Phillip and Yvonne (Nicole Kidman) Work it Out in 'The Upside'

Photo credit: STX Entertainment

The focus of the French film was on equal footing between the two men, but in the American version the lion's share goes to Kevin Hart, which weakens the story a bit. The expansion of his character brings in his son, his ex and all the Bronx distractions. Plus it demands screen time for Hart-style laughs, which includes him playing with a "rainforest" shower and having gay panic over changing a catheter (very interesting in the midst of his Oscar hosting controversy). On the positive side, it did give Hart a chance to create the character, and there is a really good scene where Dell talks about his father.

This is one of those obvious Awards bait movies that was pushed to January after focus group testing, or however the film industry tests these possibilities. But for once it isn't a bomb they're trying to hide or something that doesn't work. It's just a pleasant story of two men who only have each other to save.

"The Upside" opens everywhere on January 11th. Featuring Kevin Hart, Bryan Cranston, Nicole Kidman, Julianna Margulies, Tate Donovan and Aja Naomi King. Screenplay by Jon Hartmere. Directed by Neil Burger. Rated "PG-13"



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