

Unusual, Passionate 'Aloha' is Deeply Resonant

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Films with major movie stars that take real chances on story formula are rare. "Aloha" is one such example, and produces considerations that are way off the beaten path. Is it an allegory? An absurdity? An homage to 1960s paranoia? Only writer/director Cameron Crowe knows for sure.

Despite all the questions after the film, the ride through the story is wild enough to maintain a commitment to it. There are several holes in the plot, soap opera-like revealings and apparent casting miscues, but in the end it doesn't matter, as our heroes (Bradley Cooper and Emma Stone) use a covert rocket satellite launch as a basis for matchmaking. Step by step, the scenario creates an atmosphere that is centered around man's inhumanity to its myth and nature, but also takes some time for a running gag about a pilot who communicates nonverbally. For Cameron Crowe, it's a flight of creative fancy.

Brian Gilcrest (Bradley Cooper) is an ex-military covert operator who has worked with private contractor Carson Welch (Bill Murray). After committing some larceny and getting injured in Afghanistan, Gilcrest is blackballed, and comes to Hawaii to seek redemption with Welch once again, this time on a satellite launch that could expand the local military presence. After touchdown in the Aloha state, he runs into an old flame Tracy (Rachel McAdams), and is escorted around the project by eager pilot Allison Ng (Emma Stone).



Gilchrist (Bradley Cooper) and Allison (Emma Stone) Meet Cute in 'Aloha'

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

One of Gilcrest's assignments is to negotiate with the native president of the sovereign nation of Hawaii ("Hawaiian by birth, American by force") to readjust an ancient burial ground for the anticipated base expansion. All this is complicated by his new connection to Allison, his past with Tracy, the threats by Welch and an oddball military staff which includes Col. "Fingers" (Danny McBride), General Dixon (Alec Baldwin) and Tracy's silent husband, pilot Woody (John Krasinski).

As soon as perky and beatific Emma Stone comes into view, as a by-the-book air force pilot, there is a tendency to groan at such a mismatched piece of casting. But one of the surprises is how her character evolves in the story, and what she comes to realize. Like all of the characters in the film, what is on the surface regarding their roles don't necessarily match up to what they become by the end, which is why the steps along the way are so entertaining.

Writer/director Cameron Crowe has produced cult films ("Say Anything...", "Fast Times At Ridgemont High") and head-scratching misfires ("Vanilla Sky") in his 33-year film career, and "Aloha" belongs somewhere in the middle of that spectrum. It is impossible to market and explain to a potential audience, except as a comedy, but it's more bemusing than laugh out loud funny. Essentially it is in the auteur category, a defined term that stamps a director as unique to their product. No one, except Cameron Crowe, could have come up with "Aloha."

The supporting cast of movie stars and distinct character actors are vital to the background force of the morality in the proceedings. Danny McBride steps away from his brand character to try and create an offbeat bureaucrat. John Krasinski as Woody is a looming presence in the Tracy/Gilcrest reunion. Alec Baldwin continues his sleight-of-hand with a loony portrayal of a general. And Bill Murray is Bill Murray as Carson Welch, but with a little Cameron Crowe-stardust thrown upon him.



The All Star Cast of 'Aloha'

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

By the end, the surface plot almost becomes secondary to what the film is reaching for, but it can get a little too convenient if followed to the letter. Secrets are revealed by falling into the laps of the main characters, who figure out motivations – for example – without much more than a video clip, taken by a boy (Tracy's son) on a supposed top secret military installation. Whether that is suppose to be laid back Hawaii or a lapse in security, it's tough to fathom in a post-9/11 world. But then again, when it comes to covert operations in this geo-political age, EVERYTHING is tough to fathom. Which is probably the point of "Aloha."

This film is a treat if you like open-ended and character-driven stories of modern problems and relationships. The key is not will-they-or-won't-they get together, but will-they-or-won't-they save the world? And from what?

"Aloha" opens everywhere on May 29th. Featuring Bradley Cooper, Emma Stone, Danny McBride, Rachel McAdams, John Krasinski, Alec Baldwin and Bill Murray. Written and directed by Cameron Crowe. Rated "PG-13"



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