

A Hologram for the King (2016)

Rated R. Running time: 1 hours 37 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 1; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 4.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!

Psalms 27:14

A word search reveals that the theme of waiting runs throughout both the books of Psalms and Isaiah. It is also at the heart of director Tom Tykwer's new film adapted from Dave Eggers' 2012 novel, though our Willy Loman-like salesman Alan Clay is waiting for the arrival of a lesser king than did the psalmist, that of King Abdullah Saudi Arabia. Like another famous play that it also resembles, *Waiting for Godot*, this film has a touch of absurdity, though not quite as dark. Think instead of Christopher Guest's documentary, *Waiting for Guffman*. Add to this the fish out of water theme combined with a poignant love story, and you have a pleasing little film that will make you feel better for having seen it.

Tom Hanks portrays effectively the failed businessman ruined by the hard economic times still occurring in 2010. His face looks like a waxen mask when he turns on his business smile, while at other times possessing a world weary, put-upon look. He awakens from a nightmare in which he is on a roller coaster to find that he is aboard an airliner bound for Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. During the next days his life will very much resemble that roller coaster ride. The plane is definitely not owned by

American Airlines: an imam is holding the stewardess's microphone, leading the majority of the passengers in a Muslim prayer. Alan is traveling to Arabia in the hope of selling to the King a holographic teleconferencing system for a new planned city scheduled to be finished in 2025. This is Alan's last chance to recover his failed career, indeed, his life. He is divorced from his wife, and his loss of his old job has forced his college-age Kit daughter (Tracey Fairway) to defer her educational plans. Fortunately, his greatest success has been to maintain a close relationship with her, so she has readily forgiven him and keeps in almost daily contact through their laptops. (She actually initiates some of their exchanges.)

Alan checks into the Hyatt and discovers that the site of the King's Metropolis of Economy and Trade (KMET), a fictionalized version of King Abdullah Economic City, is an hour's drive out in the desert. He oversleeps, thus missing the regular shuttle, so he calls for special transportation. His driver Yousef (Alexander Black) turns out to have lived in Alabama for a while and has Western music tastes, but unsuitable to Alan's liking. When they arrive at the site of the proposed city there is only a large business building and a distant hostel—and a large tent in which Alan's three-person team sit at laptops barely functional because of the weak WiFi, no air conditioning, and no food service. They eagerly expect him to fix things. However, when he goes to the lavishly appointed business center, the receptionist, her head covered and yet her face made up with the latest products out of Paris or New York, tells him that neither the King nor his representative have arrived. Possibly the next day.

During each of the following days Alan continues to oversleep, thus becoming dependent upon Yousef for his transportation. And each day the cool receptionist gives him the same story. And so the film takes on the semblance of the repetitious *Ground Hog Day*. Losing patience at last, Alan boards an

elevator while the receptionist is away from her desk. Stepping off the elevator and surveying the fully equipped (including air conditioning) room, he encounters a Danish consultant named Hanne (Sidse Babett Knudsen) who gives him a bottle of illicit liquor, and later at a wild private party at her embassy, an opportunity for sex, which he politely rejects. Along the way a growth on his back gets out of control when the cheap plastic chairs he sits in collapse twice, and he tries to lance the painful lump with an unsanitized knife. This brings him to the clinic where Dr. Zahra Hakim (Sarita Choudhury) treats him. She is such a rarity in the country, a female doctor, that Yousef can scarcely believe it.

Zahra will become more than just Alan's doctor as the story progresses, and Yousef also will become an important part of Alan's life, taking him to his distant home which includes passing through Islam's holiest city. This creates a moment of tension because Yousef, engaged in conversation, misses the turnoff designated for non-Muslims to by-pass the holy city. Alan is given a Saudi checkered head covering, but if the stern-faced policemen that pass them in the city's crowded streets should look at them closely, they could be in serious trouble.

During the course of the story we see signs and effects of globalism, including Alan's part in it. There are several short flashbacks to the moment when Alan has gathered the workers of his factory to inform them that as a result of a deal he has negotiated their jobs are being sent to China. At the KMET during his climbing up the stairs of an unfinished building he encounters a group of foreign workers. During a break the immigrants are watching two of their members engaged in a fight. At some point Yousef wryly observes, "We don't have unions; we have Filipinos."

Alan's seemingly interminable waiting does come to an end, and it looks very favorable for the team of Americans, but...The

conclusion is positive, though unexpected—by Alan and us viewers. Sometimes what we get out of the surprising twists in life are even better than what we had planned. This is one of those little films with a big star that is sure to delight those looking for comedy with a touch of the exotic and the dramatic.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the May issue of Visual Parables..