A Good Year


Director: Ridley Scott
Classification: M (15+)
Duration: 118 minutes
We rate it: Four stars.

When I heard that one of my favourite directors of all time, English filmmaker Ridley Scott, was making a romantic comedy, I could scarcely believe it. This is the man who, over the years, has brought us spectacular cinematic experiences like Gladiator, Alien, Bladerunner, and Legend, none of which are particularly comedic, and all of which stand as beautifully-crafted films whose most striking characteristic is the extraordinary Ridley Scott visual style that overlays their every frame. Scott’s cinematographic stamp, a gorgeous aesthetic sheen that has influenced a generation of video-clip directors and advertising executives, has been much-imitated by other filmmakers but has, in my opinion, never been surpassed. Scott’s visual style is a compelling trademark indeed, but it seems less suited to intimate human dramas than it is to action films, period spectacles and fantasies.

With A Good Year, Scott marks a change in direction as a filmmaker, and he has managed that change beautifully. Working with a script based on a popular novel by Peter Mayle, Scott has explored a touching and funny romantic premise that sets an affecting love story amid the idyllic surrounds of Provence’s winemaking region.

Russell Crowe, here a long way from his last collaboration with Scott (which was tough, stylish epic Gladiator) tries on his romantic drama shoes and does so with quite some success. Crowe is aided by some very talented supporting players, including Albert Finney, Tom Hollander and the young Freddie Highmore, and he’s matched by one of France’s most radiant and talented actresses, Marion Cotillard, who plays the woman with whom Crowe’s character falls madly in love.

Crowe plays Max Skinner, an arrogant, wealthy and precociously successful London stockbroker. As the film opens, Max pulls off a cunning and not-quite-by-the-books deal that makes his company millions of pounds in mere minutes of trading. Evoking envy from his colleagues and rage from his competitors, Max’s coup puts him at the top of his game. Within a day, though, he’s in hot water from all sides: he is under investigation for market misconduct, and he’s summoned to France as a result of the...
death of a distant relative. Max, it seems, is the only surviving heir to a gorgeous vineyard and estate in Provence.

With this as the film’s setup, Scott lets Max loose in the beautiful, picture-postcard village life of Provence, and then confronts him with an equally beautiful and very headstrong French woman, Fanny (Cotillard). Fanny has a complex history with the area and its inhabitants, and she has a fiery relationship with Max, whose first encounter with her doesn’t go entirely to plan. While trying to come to terms with his growing attraction to the mysterious beauty, Max must also make heads or tails of the puzzling mess that the estate’s finances are in; he wrestles with his guilt at wanting to sell the property, and falls afoul of his bosses in London, who want his back across the channel. Sparks most certainly ensue.

Scott has made a surprisingly touching film from this light and warm premise. Crowe, once he relaxes into the performance, proves quite lovable and charming as the man who learns what to value in life, and Cotillard glows suitably as what might be called “the thinking man’s screen goddess”. The natural surroundings Scott has chosen as locations are of course indescribably beautiful, and the narrative rewards the audience as well. There’s much pleasure to be had here, and for those willing to take a punt on a film variety Ridley Scott hasn’t tried his hand at fermenting before, there are ample rewards. Without wanting to push the winemaking metaphor too far, A Good Year is the work of a fine director whose creations are maturing wonderfully.

Nick Prescott