

Screen, Screen Reviews

Sundance 2019 – Late Night – Review

Online Screen Editor Jacob Heayes finds *Late Night* to be a disappointingly derivative journey into talk-show production.

5 mins read

Written by & Jacob Heayes | Jun 14, 2019

For decades, late-night talk shows have consistently ruptured the cosy containment of the television set, establishing themselves as vessels for both entertainment and discourse. The contemporary late-night personality surpasses traditional demands for a television host, instead sitting firmly within the cultural zeitgeist and even disrupting it. Nisha Ganatra's *Late Night* toys with the idea of a media-saturated audience outpacing an archaic talk-show format embedded within sly criticism of the draconian networks overruling it. Yet for as many sharp stabs at the entertainment world the film offers, its rote structure ultimately clashes with underlying attempts to deliver more radical ideas.

Emma Thompson is perfectly cast as talk-show host Katherine Newbury, a bitter and steadfast figure whose passion for entertainment has been stunted by her unwillingness to connect to her audience. A presenter who never leaves her desk, Newbury is an immediately engaging character despite her inherent unlikeability, largely in part to Thompson's wonderfully scathing delivery and charm. Whilst there are more than a few jabs at her English accent and middle-age, Mindy Kaling's script wisely doesn't highlight these features as stereotypes or weakness, but incorporates them into a larger theme of self-confidence. With fierce competition from distinct names as Jimmy Fallon and Seth Meyers, the challenge to harness a unique voice in late-night television is one that appears impossible to the veteran Newbury. Enter Molly Patel: a charming, if naive, chemical plant employee turned television writer also played by Kaling. In classical Hollywood fashion, Molly is the perfect foil for Katherine with her youthful optimism and fresh ideas. At first resistant to one another, the two predictably begin to collaborate and shake up the male-dominated, juvenile writer's room for good.

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These classical tropes however simultaneously prove to be the film's downfall. As the film plods towards its all too telegraphed denouement, character arcs and comedic setpieces begin to wane thin and increasingly tired. For a film so centered around female authorship and independence, there's a surprising amount of screentime wasted on meandering romantic subplots that only result in its well-intended message feeling awkwardly misguided. The characters are aggressively archetypal to the point of parody. Katherine and Molly's relationship seems initially nonsensical, so sharply contrasting are their character traits. Yet, the narrative demands Katherine to abandon her stubbornness too often in order to make their friendship believable in the 100-minute runtime, deflating subsequent emotional scenes.

Mindy Kaling in *Late Night* by Nisha Ganatra. Image courtesy of Sundance Institute | photo by Emily Aragonés.

The depiction of the writer's room is amusing in its buffoonery but ultimately sacrifices character for satire, as several members of the room are reduced to scene-filling bodies, given very little in the way of dialogue or even names (as one running joke itself highlights). The writers who *are* given personalities on the other hand are comical in their triviality. Hugh Dancy's arc with Molly is bizarrely regressive and feels worthless given how quickly it's dropped. Reid Scott on the other hand is gifted with a character who is at the very least sympathetic, but similarly only gains significance too late in the film for his resolution to feel satisfying. John Lithgow even appears as Newbury's husband, a former musical prodigy now struck by Parkinson's disease. Thankfully, the dynamic between Thompson and Lithgow is empathetic and warm, delivering another familiar arc with some verve. All that being said, Lithgow's function as a pawn to create conflict is too transparent, robbing him of his own individuality and intrigue. As tragic as his backstory is, the film rarely devotes attention to it bar a small handful of exchanges.

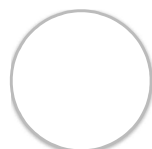
This theme infects *Late Night* constantly – its gleefully defiant ideas are too often punctured by the film's own lack of character or identity. The sporadically hilarious humour and brilliant lead performances are wasted when the film has no confidence in committing to its rebellious attitude. Much like Newbury herself, *Late Night* isn't a total washout but is trapped within its own conventions, refusing to present anything that feels genuinely forward-thinking.

Comedy

emma thompson

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JACOB HEAYES