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The Adjustment Bureau: A cry for freedom

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Mar. 4, 2011 NCR Today

In writer/director George Nolfi?s original action-romance-thriller film, questions about personal free will, fate, and a divine purpose to each of our lives collide head on with ideas about politics, philosophy, religion, relationships, and gender.

Just as David Norris (Matt Damon) loses the race for a U.S. Senate seat from New York, he meets a beautiful ballet dancer, Elise Sellas (Emilie Blunt), in the men?s room of the hotel. Elise hastily explains that she is hiding from security because she dared herself to crash a wedding party and she did. Norris is immediately smitten.

He then meets her again on the bus on his way to work. She gives him her phone number. But this second encounter was never to have happened, nor was David to have fallen in love with her because his is a bigger destiny than he can imagine, and Elise is not part of it. David loses Elise for a year, and then sees her yet again.

Men in grey business suits and hats appear and try to correct David?s course. Harry (Anthony Mackie) seems like a personal messenger who would rather let David do what he wants than interfere. When Harry fails to spill coffee on David to delay him for a few moments, a butterfly effect begins.

When David and Elise?s relationship becomes intense, Richardson (John Slattery) and his henchmen kidnap David and bring him to a warehouse in some kind of parallel space. He threatens David not to mess with the Chairman?s plans or tell anyone that this small army of messengers exists to keep what seems like chosen ones on track.

When David pursues Elise and ignores the messengers, the formidable Thompson (Terence Stamp), obviously higher up in the hierarchy of messengers, shows up. He speaks more forcefully for the Chairman, trying to manipulate David saying that if he chooses Elise, she will never fulfill her dreams. Is this what David wants for her?

But David is in love. He finally tells Elise about the messengers, and they embark on a wild journey, with the creepy messengers in pursuit, unlocking doors through time and space in order to choose their own destiny and accept the consequences.

?The Adjustment Bureau? has a kind of video game feel to it because at each door a decision must be made. It is based on ?The Adjustment Team?, a short story by the science fiction writer Phillip K. Dick (1928 ? 1982). Dick also wrote the novel ?Do Androids Dram of Electric Sleep?? that became the 1982 sci-fi cult classic ?The Blade Runner? as well as the short story on which ?Minority Report? was based.

Director Nolfi added the romantic twist that complicates further the concepts of free will, predestination, power and control. That the messengers of the Adjustment Bureau wear grey suits, not black or white, was an insightful choice by the filmmakers because life is not black and white. There are many shades of grey that we, as human beings, are called to navigate.

?The Adjustment Bureau? is not a message movie as some may think. The director respects the audience and leaves abundant space to grapple with issues, confirm their beliefs, and to ask plenty of questions.

Nolfi told a colleague that answering questions at screenings in different countries has been an interesting experience. In Germany, for instance, the press wanted to know if the film was about a totalitarian state.

At the screening I attended in Tustin, Calif. as part of the audience and as a member of a panel discussing the film afterwards with the director, the lens was religion -- God and free will.

[The following paragraphs contain SPOILERS. Stop reading if you want to be surprised by the film!]

However, my major issue with ?The Adjustment Bureau? is that it is all about men and mostly populated by them. I spoke to Nolfi about this and he explained that in the original version of his screenplay, the Chairman was to have been a woman, indeed, David Norris? mother.

But as the film developed, it became clear that the Chairman would have to remain invisible, a name that designated a position more than a person. Nolfi said that this made it possible for anyone watching the film through any lens, but the lens of faith in particular, to visualize the Chairman, or God, in whatever way came natural to them.

This explanation is fair enough. But it does not go far enough.

There are three questions that pop culture critics, and feminist academics, pose for viewers to consider when viewing films:

1. Are there two or more women in the film with names?
2. Do they talk to each other?
3. Do they talk to each other about something other than men?

In ?The Adjustment Bureau? there are four female figures that you might recall when you walk out of the theater.

First, there is Elise, the lead female character. It is her presence in the film that drives the turmoil, or the action. It is Elise who is crude and when David meets her the second time she looks like a hooker. Although David?s bid for senator is derailed by a youthful indiscretion that was leaked to the press, it is Elise who is the transgressor who threatens to derail the Chairman?s plan, not the dozens of males who are running everything.

Then there is Lauren (Jessica Lee Keller), Elise?s best friend. Lauren and Elise share very few conversations together, and when they do talk it is about men.

Third is the nameless woman who runs the bar where meetings happen and messages are exchanged; she never speaks.

Finally, there is Lady Liberty in New York harbor, where Elise finally gets a chance to make a choice for herself -- and it is to be with David no matter the consequences. Lady Liberty does communicate a powerful message of freedom, but no one says her name.

When I brought up these issues to Nolfi he said that in the scene where David and Elise run through a huge library, all the images along the side are base reliefs of female figures.

?However,? I replied, ?They are nameless and inarticulate.?

It is no surprise that most Hollywood films are about men -- as the films released in 2010 demonstrated. Many stories are told from a white male perspective and are about the male as the symbol of universal human experience. But does it have to stay this way?

As I noted in my review of Peter Rodger?s 2009 documentary ?Oh My God?, [1] as long as 50 percent of the human race is not included in the stories that ubiquitous Hollywood films tell -- whether documentaries or other genres -- reality as presented in cinema will continue to reinforce the idea that men do indeed rule the world, and that women, along with children, and other minorities, are not part of the solution to any conflict, real or imagined.

An argument could be made that this is the subversive point ?The Adjustment Bureau? is trying to make. But I don?t think so.

The Adjustment Bureau, if it exists, could really use alterations that includes a vision -- a chorus of feminine voices expressing the freedom to be heard, to be respected, to guide and lead the world together with men.

?The Adjustment Bureau? film and premise, if considered through the lens of theology, or any perspective, needs a major course correction. The movie is about a lot more than free will.

Did this year?s Oscar-winning film ?The King?s Speech? teach us nothing?
After all, everyone does have a voice.

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