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FILM

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A Previous Engagement

(U.S. - Malta)

By JOHN ANDERSON

A Palisades Pictures release of a Paragraph Pictures presentation, in association with UKFS Films, of an Ashdale Films (Malta)/Buccaneer Films production. Produced by David Gordian. Executive producers, Antony Blakey, Toby Mathews, Damita Nikapota. Co-producer, Savitri Gordian. Co-executive producer, Mark Paladini. Directed, written by Joan Carr-Wiggin.

Julia - Juliet Stevenson
Alex - Tcheky Karyo
Jack - Daniel Stern
Grace - Valerie Mahaffey
Samantha - Kate Miles

If "A Previous Engagement" makes one think of the Harry Potter films, it's only because Juliet Stevenson is perhaps the only English actress of her stature who hasn't found a sinecure in the boy-wizard series. She casts her usual magic, however, in this frankly adult, determinedly lighthearted comedy of romantic errors. Favor will be found among humans of a certain age, particularly of the female persuasion.

Stevenson, who seems able to transform even her complexion to fit her characters' moods, is able with a single look to suggest a lifetime of regret. As helmer-writer Joan Carr-Wiggin's Julia, she has two lifetimes to worry about: The one she's spent with Jack (Daniel Stern), an affable dope devoted to jigsaw puzzles, and the one she didn't have with Alex (Tcheky Karyo), with whom she vowed to rendezvous on the isle of Malta, 25 years after their initial tryst. As the film begins, the 25 years have passed, they're all on Malta, and the bucolic holiday is about to end.

There are obvious efforts made in "A Previous Engagement" to keep things on a sweetly even keel -- the collection of pop songs is oppressively upbeat; the Maltese landscapes are almost too pretty, at least for a movie with such a heart of darkness. OK, heart of twilight: Its major issues are the fog of romance and love-as-insurance. Julia has come to Malta with her husband; Alex has shown up with his semi-girlfriend, Samantha (Kate Miles); neither has come prepared to risk it all for a quarter-century old memory. But they both show up, so there's got to be something cooking.

Stevenson carries the movie as Julia, who is burdened with the sad history of having married a man less charming and dumber than she. Their daughters, as a result, are too dim not to bore her, no matter how maternally inclined she is. How Jack ever got her to the altar is a mystery, but Karyo's Alex, too, seems unworthy of her. It's not that Julia is superior, or devastatingly beautiful, but she's the movie's true romantic and, as such, its hero.

What she's the hero of is often a sitcom of grand aspirations: Much of the time the characters are trying to keep each other from finding out whose bed they'd like to be in or have been in: The wonderful Valerie Mahaffey, as the American divorcee Grace, is able to seduce Jack, who feels betrayed, about an hour after she meets him. Julia on the other hand, can't catch an erotic break. Why Carr-Wiggin decided to frustrate Julia is odd, but keeping with the theme of patience. Twenty-five years worth.

Despite the occasional detour into mawkishness, "A Previous Engagement" nicely balances unutterable truths about marriage and love with the comedy that is human interaction and the unending drama that is man and women, repulsion and attraction. Stevenson is simply a magnet, of course, as usual.

Production values are terrific.

Camera (color), Bruce Worrall; editors, Pamela Benwick, Richard Benwick, Carr-Wiggin; art director, Ino Bonello; costume designer, Charlotte Walter; sound, Fraser Barber; choreographer, Jes Sciberras; first assistant director, John McKeown; casting, Simone Reynolds, Mark Paladini. Reviewed at the Laemmle's Town Center 5, Encino, Calif., May 9, 2008. Running time: 118 MIN.

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