

## Meet Me in Malta: Middle-Aged Passion with Sublime Juliet Stevenson

BY ANDREW SARRIS |



Buccaneer Films Inc.

Where's her Romeo? Juliet Stevenson in *A Previous Engagement*.

### A PREVIOUS ENGAGEMENT

*Running Time* 118 minutes

*Written and directed by* Joan Carr-Wiggin

*Starring* Juliet Stevenson, Daniel Stern, Tchéky Karyo

Joan Carr-Wiggin's *A Previous Engagement*, from her own screenplay, takes place entirely on the picturesque Mediterranean island of Malta as the writer-director slyly spins a romantically feminist fable with farcical flourishes that sometimes fails to deliver the desired laughs. Fortunately, the very gifted stage and screen actress Juliet Stevenson plays the central role of a middle-aged married woman and Seattle libertarian who persuades her set-in-his-ways insurance salesman husband, Jack, to take Julia and their two grown daughters to Malta for their summer vacation. What Jack and their girls don't know is that Julia has a secret plan to keep a 25-year-old prearranged reunion with her first love, a feisty Frenchman named Alex (Tchéky Karyo).

Since the whole film was shot in Malta, the backstory has to be parceled out in bits and pieces via Ms. Stevenson's inner monologue and increasingly frenzied facial expressions as her character is suspended in a state of panic over fear of discovery by her husband, and uncertainty about what and who she will find at the end of her long-cherished personal rainbow. Hence, the movie is slow going in its early stages while the goal posts are being laboriously constructed.

Against all odds, Alex shows up for the long delayed rendezvous more passionate than ever for Julia. For Julia, long-felt doubts about Alex's sincerity rise to the surface, especially when he confesses to having been married and divorced four times in the interim—not to mention all his former mistresses, like Julia. Indeed, at one point, Julia is so reflexively jealous that she mistakenly suspects that Alex's teenage daughter is his current girlfriend. The humor is thus repeatedly propelled by Julia's tendency to jump to conclusions.

The big surprise of the film is the bizarre reaction of Julia's husband when he learns of Julia's deviousness. Instead of behaving like the stick-in-the-mud husband we have seen previously, he purchases a blindingly all-white touristy wardrobe topped by a jaunty white fedora and hits the town's hot spot for female consolation. He winds up on the dance floor with ex-chorus girl Grace (Valerie Mahaffey) and performs a creditable rumba and salsa, much to Julia's horrified amazement at this hitherto unexplored side of her hitherto humdrum husband. This is usually the standard formula for marital reconciliation. I won't reveal what finally happens because the viewers might enjoy finding out for themselves, while savoring the middle-aged magic of Ms. Stevenson's hyper-expressiveness. A great actress even in a not-so-great comedy is fully worth the price of admission in these far from halcyon days, both movie-wise and world-wise.

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