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A Previous Engagement is charming and engaging

by Justine Connelly

I had not seen Daniel Stern in a movie since he was last put through a number of challenges that would likely kill an average human being in *Home Alone 2*. The dopey, neglectful husband he plays in Buccaneer Films' *A Previous Engagement* – to be released this Friday, May 9 - at first seems to share the singular intensity of bungled burglar Marv.

The film's protagonist is Julia Reynolds (played by Juliet Stevenson), a housekeeper of a mother in an stagnant relationship with her husband Jack (Stern), longing for Alex Belmont (Tcheky Karyo) - a man she had a passionate affair with 25 years ago. They agreed at the time to meet again in Malta in 25 years. Julia brings useless husband and whiny daughters to Malta along for the rendez-vous – apparently confused as to whether to vacation with her family or run off with an old lover. Throughout the film, she attempt to do both – with occasionally hilarious consequences.

Stevenson and Stern are the stars of this film in every way. Stevenson's performance is convincing – she is tormented and awkward – but through the use of body language, she subtly implies that the free spirit she was 25 years ago is still in there somewhere. Though Stern at first seems to border on moronic, his character develops with the film, and he proves himself a strong, nuanced actor by its conclusion. He begins as a husband who deserves to be cuckolded, and ends as a man with his own story – no longer a caricature.

This is writer/director Joan Carr-Wiggin's second film. It's shot beautifully with plenty of help from the setting. Each shot is framed by the beauty of Malta – whether it's a background view of the ocean, or a lump of mashed potatoes sitting under an archway on an imperial red carpet in an open-air villa (a particularly humorous scene). The setting romanticizes the encounter – more so than the relationship between Julia and Alex, who though both carefully developed, lack the chemistry needed to convince an audience that any relationship that might develop would last. Whether this is intentional is unclear.

Overall, *A Previous Engagement* is quite an entertaining film, moving beyond the romantic comedy genre with its carefully crafted lead characters and unpredictable plot line.

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