

MOVIE REVIEWS

SXSW London 2026 - Virginia Woolf's Night And Day ★★★



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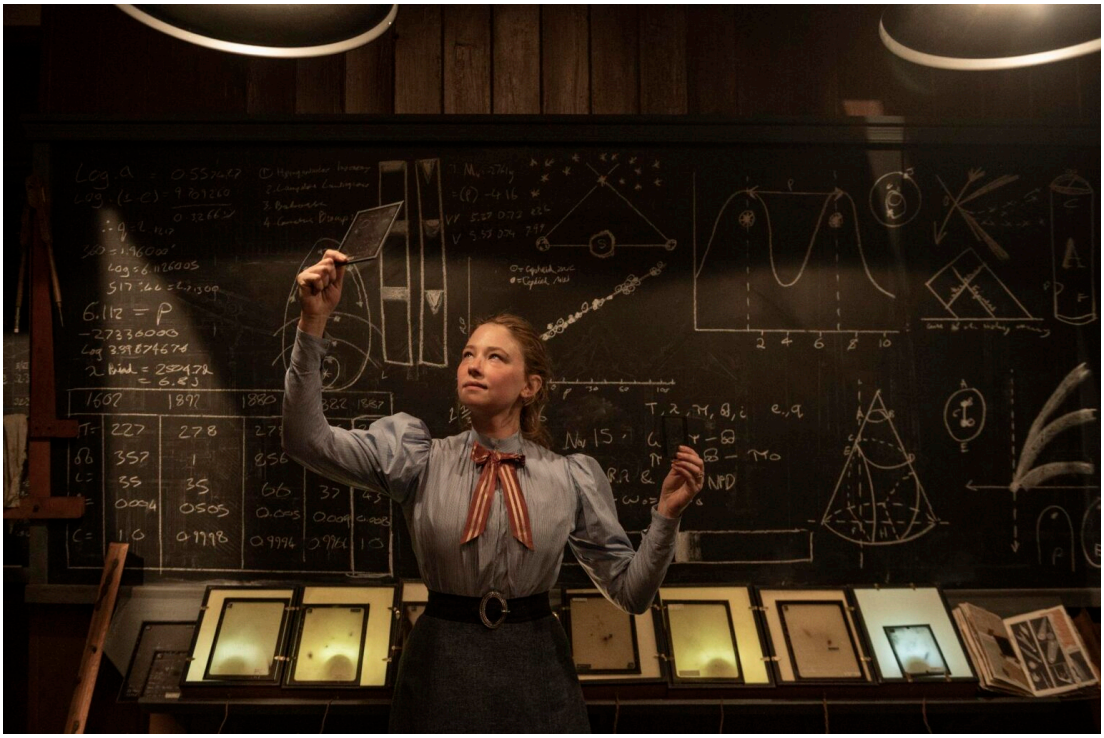
Director: Tina Gharavi

Starring: Haley Bennett, Elyas M'Barek, Jack Whitehall, Lily Allen, Timothy Spall, Jennifer Saunders, Sally Philips, Misia Butler

Star gazing remains a wonder for many of us looking up at beautiful, clear skies trying to decipher stars, planets and more. With an entire universe out there, questions may arise as we inevitably ponder our role, are we mere pinpricks or the centre of the universe? These are questions that Katharine Hilsbury dares to utter as a woman in 1910s London within **Virginia Woolf's Night & Day.** She wishes to be an astronomer, during those times of slow progress for equality, to test those theories and be recognised in her own right. **Night & Day** whilst operating under the guise of a period drama eschews all romantic notions for Katharine in her quest to be independent and enter the patriarchal and hierarchical domain of science. This may sound predictable, and most of the film does follow a colour by numbers trope, but Haley Bennett, as Katharine, does her best to provide an earnest, empathetic portrait of a woman combating the system.

Virginia Woolf's novel, bearing the same name, on which this film is based must have been incredibly prescient for its era in touching on such themes. Modern day audiences may therefore not be as impressed as some inroads having been made since then, enabling women to have the choice to work, at least! However, for Edwardian readers, as the novel was published in 1919 and without a nom de plume, tackling these subjects with such wit may have been perceived as audacious! This adaptation, from BAFTA and Sundance nominated director Tina Gharavi, attempts to convey that level of audacity in Katharine's demands to enter 'male only' institutions and have a seat within the rooms of prestigious establishments so that she too can explore the universe and the inner workings of votes pertaining to women's rights. Unfortunately, the attempts to inject a degree of modernisation with some perky soundtrack choices and current editing techniques merely seem to antagonise and frustrate more than anything!

There are moments where Katharine's inability to find her voice is literally replaced by a visual effect and may encourage a slight titter, or inward groan, but ultimately feels cartoonish. This might have been a device that Gharavi thought to employ as light relief and an illustration that a woman at such time was required to suppress any anger and opinions. But this blunt approach to demonstrate such sentiments will likely further alienate audiences.



Neither is there any attempt to explore any depth to these characters, aside from Katharine meaning that many scenes feel hollow – why should we care about the wellbeing of the many other characters introduced as part of Katharine's life? In that vein, **Night & Day** offers no new perspective to stereotypical, frothy period dramas despite its protests that it falls into the anti rom-com genre as Katharine denies all potential for love. She considers entering into a marriage of convenience, with her dullard friend William (Jack Whitehall) to advance her career, which is progressive, at least! Still, there are greater expectations for a film of this ilk depicting pioneering women!

Where the film is very good is in documenting the discoveries made by Katharine regarding variable stars, highlighting her passion for the night skies and determination. Bennett rises to

the occasion in portraying the delights and frustrations of a woman ahead of her time striving for an opportunity to learn and develop herself. Other positive aspects are her involvement with the Suffragettes whilst randomly meeting Mary Datchet, an independent working woman, played by an almost unrecognisable Lily Allen. She is the epitome of an advocate for the feminist movement but equally harbours her own struggles with the patriarchy and hidden privilege. Fortunately, Katharine also has the support of her cousin Cyrille (Misia Butler) whom her controlling father (Timothy Spall) believes to be leading her astray. Cyrille, however, depicts as an early form of male ally and simply believes that they were 'born in the wrong century' whilst Butler and Bennett share tremendous chemistry.

Where the film is bad is in its awkward attempts to connect a disparate ensemble cast with paper thin storylines for the supporting characters. This results in the film feeling overstuffed and unfocused despite its short length of 95 minutes. **Night & Day** also suffers in places from the same issues as "Wuthering Heights" in attempting a modern interpretation to attract younger audiences which readers of the novel may find jarring in its oversimplification.

Katharine's life is fascinating enough to have remained the focal point with emphasis firmly placed on her quest to explore a galaxy far, far away. Fortunately, Night & Day does possess many charming moments that do work well with the ensemble such as when they witness a once in a lifetime viewing of Halley's Comet. The wonder and awe displayed on Bennett's face does evoke an appreciation of the visuals of the stunning comet that is also Bennett's namesake. Virginia Woolf's love for astronomy is also highlighted in such scenes which will hopefully introduce new audiences to her work.

Night & Day is an enjoyable watch that chooses to follow a well trodden direction for period dramas whilst leaning on elements of a comedy of errors. Its conventional direction ensures that it will be a crowd-pleaser even though the film could have been braver to push those boundaries further in its bid to makes us all dream big and reach for those stars!

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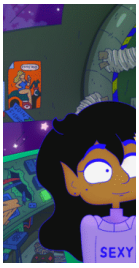
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