

Movie review: The Prince and Me

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By MARK BROATCH

Because Paige (Julia Stiles) is a plain-speaking, career-focused Wisconsin medical student who drives a pick-up and dearly loves her down-home farming family, we can expect a romantic tale between her and a Danish prince will be more feisty than fairy.

Studio execs have twigged that today's hipster girls like their candy to have a modern flavour - fairy tale is fairly stale - so they have to move expectations along a bit. Culturally (and grammatically) this is some distance from Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr in *The King and I*, though perhaps not that far. Less 1956; more 1987.

Stiles is an old hand in such roles. She played Ophelia in the 2000 version of *Hamlet* starring Ethan Hawke and has been in film adaptations of *Othello* and *The Taming of the Shrew* (*O and 10 Things I Hate about You*), so Paige's ignorance of Shakespearean sonnets - she has a compulsory literature paper - is perhaps a bit of a knowing nod to her fans.

Helping her through the Bard's ingenious metaphors is Prince Edvard (Luke Mably), who's studying (mostly) incognito at the same Wisconsin university with the help of his sarky but patient valet, Soren (the reliably dry Ben Miller) - a steady Jeeves to Mably's Wooster, with added Xbox. In return for being steeped in English lit, as all Europeans are, of course, along with buckets of charm and wit, Paige teaches him the basics of US college life: making turkey sandwiches; what 21st-century American women really want; how to wash clothes.

Paige and Eddie have been thrown together as reluctant organic chemistry partners, but as some wise fool tells Paige: "Chemistry isn't just in a class, kiddo." Eddie has been cut off from his royal stipend and has to work in the college bar with Paige ? the same bar he was thrown out of

for insulting her a few days earlier. Gradually, of course, they win each other over.

But does she put her dream on hold? Or does he renege on his life's duty?

Ah, that is the question.

That such a piece of confection can not only pull it off, but yank it several cuts above its predecessors, is due almost completely to the talents and considerable charm of its lovers. With the help of her sonorous voice, unlined round face and expressive mouth and eyes, Stiles loses herself in most roles, even when the material is predictable. Mably, a Londoner who was in Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* and has done some TV, does pretty well too. He's engaging and handsome-ish.

Director Martha Coolidge, who has done lighter movies and a lot of TV including some *Sex and the City*, knows how to concoct a pleasant romantic brew, with extra feminism.

Paige is not looking for distraction, yet we are reminded all her friends are marrying. She's level-headed yet she goes all gooey-eyed over the crown jewels. He fears domesticity yet also yearns for it. He's spoilt but finds a new innocence and responsibility under her influence.

Personal growth is a necessary rite of passage in such films. Even when at the start Eddie's racing through the dense streets of Copenhagen (which miraculously dissolve into fields within minutes) and kissing the girls for the paparazzi, we know he's just having a bit of fun before he considers the main act of princely duty.

Everyone knows that, Prince Albert apart, Euro royals are far more boring than Eddie, who can hot-rod a tractor and is happy to help out on Paige's parents' farm at Thanksgiving, that magical time of loving and healing. And they don't have the perfect English accents of Prince Eddie and James Fox's King Harald. Miranda Richardson at least tries a Scandinavian lilt for Queen Rosalind.

The Prince and Me sensibly doesn't stray far from its Cinderella roots, but smarter fantasies like this will always find a friendly audience.

- Julia Stiles, Luke Mably, Ben Miller, James Fox, Miranda Richardson.

Directed by Martha Coolidge.
Released July 8.