

Clever script, actors make 'Prince' charming

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Movie critic

When a pre-med student at the University of Wisconsin can't find her knight on a white horse, she settles for a prince on a sable steed.

Such are the compromises Paige Morgan (Julia Stiles) must make in "The Prince & Me," an intelligent fairy tale directed by Martha Coolidge. Thanks to a witty script and smartly observed performances, this "Prince" truly is charming.

Stiles' farm girl is totally focused on her education, hoping to attend medical school at The Johns Hopkins University. She's not looking for romance.

That's why she has so little patience with her aimless new chemistry lab partner, Eddie (Luke Mably), who appears to want nothing more than a good time.

Little does Paige know that "Eddie" actually is Edvard Valdemar, the crown prince of Denmark. Still, she has pretty much nailed his motivation.

Eddie is in the United States because of a mistaken impression left by a "Girls Gone Wild" video. He finds Paige's resistance to his charm to be a refreshing challenge. No one ever has rejected the prince before.

He begins to win over Paige when his love of Shakespeare, whom he quotes to pick up girls, makes him the perfect guy to help Paige through a difficult course. In exchange, she carries him through organic chemistry.

The chemistry turns personal just as the paparazzi show up and blow Eddie's cover. After he returns to Denmark, Paige has to choose between her dream of becoming a doctor and her dream of a life with Eddie.

There are wonderful scenes of Eddie learning to fit in with Paige's family during Thanksgiving break. He and Paige's brothers bond while racing riding lawn mowers. (It turns out that Eddie is quite the mechanic and speed freak.)

The audience also sees Paige struggle with life under a microscope as she learns how difficult it might be to be associated with the royal family. She also must deal with the kindly king (James Fox) and icy queen (Miranda Richardson).

Stiles ("Mona Lisa Smile") always has had a haughty demeanor and an obvious intelligence that makes her perfect for the role of Paige. Stiles makes her character real and never trivializes her predicament. The audience, truly caring about Paige, is never once tempted to say, "We should all have such problems."

Mably ("28 Days Later") perfectly captures the spoiled, almost bratty nature of his petulant prince. Just like Paige, the audience is slow to warm to Eddie/Prince Edvard. But when the prince -- in full military regalia -- leans down from his horse to hoist Paige to his side, the audience melts.

Comic actor Ben Miller ("Johnny English") also stands out as Soren, the prince's valet, who always speaks his mind and resents having to pretend to be one of the world's oldest undergrads as he keeps an eye on the prince in America. Soren becomes Paige's secret ally in the struggle to turn the boy prince into a man. He also guides her through the challenges of palace life.

The movie's ending is likely to provoke mixed emotions, but I think that is part of the reason the movie works so well. It doesn't go for an easy solution to its characters' problems, and, yet, the story remains planted in the realm of fairy tale.

Of course, the last time Stiles played a character in love with a Danish prince, she ended up drowning. Luckily, her fate isn't nearly as tragic in "The Prince & Me" as it was in "Hamlet."

THE PRINCE & ME

(STAR)(STAR)(STAR)

Plot: An American pre-med student is shocked to learn that her boyfriend is the crown prince of Denmark.

What works: A witty script and smartly observed performances help create this intelligent fairy tale's charm.

What doesn't: The ending provokes mixed emotions.

Starring: Julia Stiles and Luke Mably. Director: Martha Coolidge. Running time: 1 hour 51 minutes. Rating: PG, for some sex-related material and language. Where: Grand, Elmwood Palace, Clearview Palace, West Bank Palace, Hammond Palace, Hollywood 9, Chalmette, Holiday 12, Movies 8.

Edvard Valdemar (Luke Mably), who has turned out to be the crown prince of Denmark, gives American college student Paige Morgan (Julia Stiles) a lift to the family castle in 'The Prince & Me,' directed by Martha Coolidge.