

Love Actually (2003)

Major Credits:

Director: Richard Curtis

Screenplay: Richard Curtis

Cinematography: Michael Coulter

Editor: Nick Moore

Cast: Bill Nighy (Billy Mack), Gregor Fisher (Joe), Hugh Grant (The Prime Minister), Martine McCutcheon (Natalie), Colin Firth (Jamie), Lúcia Moniz (Aurelia), Emma Thompson (Karen), Alan Rickman (Harry), Liam Neeson (Daniel), Thomas Brodie-Sangster (Sam), Kris Marshall (Colin), Chiwetel Ejiofor (Peter), Andrew Lincoln (Mark), Keira Knightly (Juliet), Laura Linney (Sarah), Rodrigo Santoro (Karl), Martin Freeman (John), Joanna Page (Judy), Billy Bob Thornton (US President), Heike Makatsch (Mia), Claudia Schiffer (Carol)

Production Background:

Richard Curtis had previously written the very successful *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *Notting Hill* (1999), and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001); *Love Actually* was the first film he directed from his own screenplay. A paradigmatic ensemble piece, *Love Actually* incorporates at least twenty significant parts to tell nine—count 'em!—integrated (if somewhat contrived) stories about the permutations of Love. Note how often the characters speak the word “actually.”

Contemporary audiences familiar with *Love Actually* as a Christmas classic—in the UK as much as in America—may be surprised to learn the film received largely mixed reviews when it first appeared (a mediocre 55 on Metacritic). Critics generally desecrated its sentimentality and the profusion of plots, which tested credibility and dampened sustained involvement in any one of the stories. Even those who went along with the film's “unrelenting schmaltz,” labeled it “Fluff, Glorious Fluff” (Ella Taylor, *LA Weekly*). Today *Love Actually* has become, for many, a beloved holiday tradition, a status that may obscure its artistic achievements.

Cinematic Qualities:

1. Editing: The montage of reunions shot from a hidden camera at the Arrivals gate of Heathrow Airport constitute what Curtis has called the “inspiration” for the film. The voiceover to the opening credits announces the optimistic theme that guides audience response to the ensuing narrative. Note the very last image of the montage in the tail credits.
2. Music: Billy Mack's recording of “Christmas Is All Around Me” at the beginning marks an inside joke for the UK audience. “Love Is All Around Me” was a Number 1 hit in Britain for 15 weeks following the release of Curtis's *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, where it served as a theme song. The film employs diegetic Christmas carols “Silent Night” and “Good King Wenceslas” to original effect, unfamiliar recordings of standards (Otis Redding singing “White Christmas,” Joni Mitchell's late rendition of “Both Sides Now”), and brilliant musical performances (Grant doing his best imitation of Tom Cruise dancing to the Pointer Sisters' “Jump!”; the climactic

- presentation of “All I Want for Christmas is You”)—all in the service of enhancing the emotional effect.
3. Acting: The all-star British cast (plus American Laura Linney) generally drew raves from critics and audiences, Bill Nighy and Emma Thompson most prominently. Thompson’s profoundly moving performance is perhaps balanced by Kris Marshall’s farcical role, while Hugh Grant, at the height of his popularity, plays his typecast part to perfection.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Sentimentality may be generally defined as the calculated manipulation of the audience’s emotions to elicit feelings of happiness, sadness, tenderness, or nostalgia that seem exaggerated when compared to real experience. In the history of literature, Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* exemplifies how sentimentality can be transformed into art. Granted that *Love Actually* provides an emotional experience that, as with *A Christmas Carol*, accounts for its enduring popularity, but does it also speak to certain truths about humanity that constitute the domain of art? Put another way, is the film seriously *about* anything aside from the immediate experience it creates?
2. There remains a long-standing tradition among critics that true art can never be popular, which may account for why the original reviews of *Love Actually* were so modest. In fact, it has continued to be a touchstone for this debate, with professional critics and bloggers weighing in on both sides. Do you regard the film as an evanescent exercise in craft—a seasonal pleasure—or a work of art?
3. The critical case *against* the movie has been best articulated by Christopher Orr in *The Atlantic*, who argues that *Love Actually* is actually “the least romantic film of all time” because it presents love as exclusively a matter of erotic attraction that needs only to be *declared* to be realized (“the word is the deed”). Furthermore, love cannot overcome what might be otherwise appear as transient or resolvable obstacles (the impositions of a mentally ill brother, a necklace foolishly purchased for a flirtatious secretary). Does the film offer a more compelling “philosophy” than simply love at first sight or bail from a relationship at the first sign of trouble?
4. Despite evolving into a “holiday classic” that has endured the test of time, *Love Actually* can also be described as “of its time” (2003), starting with Hugh Grant’s reference in the opening voiceover to “when the planes hit the towers” and including the American president who seems an amalgam of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. At the end of the year 2017, the film also seems prescient in its exploration of sexual misconduct towards women. Not only is Natalie apparently harassed (albeit off-camera) by the president, but her boss sublimates his anger (jealousy?) into a patriotic speech while punishing her by ‘redistributing’ her position and ignoring her feelings. Has the film suffered—become dated—because of the influence of shifts in contemporary culture?