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'Rocketman' takes us on a trip to Elton John's highs and lows

"Rocketman," the life story of Sir Elton Hercules John, born Reginald Dwight, is an old-style movie musical that juxtaposes the spangly world of a 1970s rock star — all bright lights, glitter and razzmatazz — against the solitary existence of a pudgy piano prodigy, pounding away on a parlor upright in a drab inconsequential corner of postwar London.

Both are imprisoned.

Last year's "Bohemian Rhapsody," the Freddie Mercury biopic covering roughly the same period, was essentially a concert film that wove together Queen's greatest hits, using threads pulled from the front man's back story — a linear collection of late-boomer musical memories.

"Rocketman" operates on the level of metaphor. The arc of its story is in conversation with the lyrics of John's songs. Throughout the film, the music complements and embellishes the story, pushing it forward — Rogers and Hammerstein, "La La Land" and "Tommy" all rolled into one.

Directed by Dexter Fletcher, who was brought in to direct "Bohemian Rhapsody"

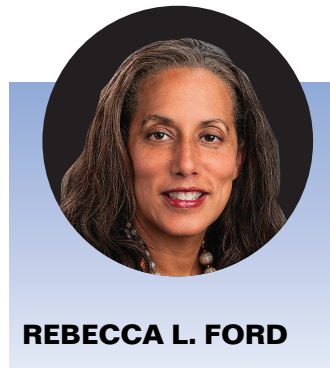
(without credit) after Bryan Singer was fired from the job, "Rocketman" is by far the better movie. Then too, Fletcher had the collaboration — to put it mildly — of the film's subject, Elton John, who developed "Rocketman" as executive producer.

The movie, told in flashback, begins with John (Taron Egerton) storming into rehab dressed in a bedazzled, red devil costume, fit with a fluttering expanse of angel-wing plumage. He's an angry Icarus, now fallen, feathers and all, into a circle of earth-bound addicts.

As the film progresses, John sheds his flaming costume chrysalis.

"Rocketman" takes off after John meets his lifelong lyricist, Bernie Taupin (Jamie Ball). After a triumphant gig at LA's Troubadour in 1970, the two manufacture hits nonstop until the combustible John is consumed by his addictions.

John and Taupin don't have a romantic relationship — Bernie's straight and Elton's gay. Yet the love story between the two is the backbone of the film. The movie's suspense resides in whether the cosmically matched partners will weather the disruption



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inflicted by the dashing villain, John Reid (Richard Madden), Elton's ruthless manager, lover and Rasputin.

As the gentle, temperate Taupin, Bell projects the same persistent kindness that permeated his performance 20 years ago as the original "Billy Elliott."

An unrecognizably zaftig Bryce Dallas Howard plays John's narcissistic mother,

Sheila, obviously enjoying her Joan Crawford turn as a mean mum.

Egerton is nerded-up to suggest John, rather than clone him. (It's mind-boggling to consider that Tom Hardy was once slated for this role.) With John's blessing, Egerton does his own singing and successfully carries the show without the audience pining too desperately for the real Elton to don his platform boots and take over the stage.

Elton John fans have already been inspired by "Rocketman" to revisit his music in droves — a longing that is complemented by John's 2018-20 "Farewell Yellow Brick Road" world tour, scheduled to coincide with the release of the movie.

"Rocketman" is John's story as he would have it told: The lonely boy who finds love after finding himself.

John doesn't flinch from tough personal topics — abandonment, abuse, addiction — and the story ends safely somewhere in the early 1990s, before the brightness of John's star is ever eclipsed.

After such a long, long time, the Rocket Man touches down with a skilled and graceful landing.