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Zellweger brings 'Judy' alive — the sadness, tragedy and tears

At the end of the rainbow there is a dark and stormy night.

"Judy," starring Renee Zellweger as the big-voiced, doe-eyed, tissue-frail Judy Garland, portrays the last year of Garland's life, bridging the summer of 1968 until her death from a barbiturate overdose at age 47 in 1969. The screenplay is based on the British playwright Peter Quilter's 2005 stage play, "End of the Rainbow."

In steep professional decline and evicted from her suite in a Los Angeles hotel, Garland is forced to leave her children, Lorna and Joey Luft (Bella Ramsey and Lewin Lloyd), with their father, the somewhat dubious movie producer Sid Luft (Rufus Sewell).

She's homeless — there's no other way to describe it — and can't regain custody of her young children until she can prove that she can provide a stable home for them. Garland reluctantly agrees to take a long-running gig at London's Talk of the Town theater, planning to use the prodigious payday to win them back.

She will have to leave her children in order to be with them.

"Judy" presents Garland as a playful and devoted, if eccentric, parent to Lorna and Joey. By this time Liza Minnelli, Garland's oldest, has her own life and is launching what we know will become an astonishing career.

Flashbacks to the filming of "The Wizard of Oz" show the miseries of Garland's indentured servitude to the MGM studio and the pressure she was under to stay thin while working interminable hours in violation of child labor laws.

The studio sent her on fake dates with Mickey Rooney and subjected her to the supervision of a publicist-minder who regulated her sleep and weight through a forced regimen of amphetamines and barbiturates.

By the time she lands in London, Garland is in shreds.

Zellweger, who has a fine voice, delivers a career-defining performance as Garland. In a field of thousands, Zellweger may be the greatest Garland impersonator ever.



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But there seems to be a straight line from Bridget Jones to Judy Garland in the Zellweger cannon. Jones is a wacky singleton who finds love and Garland is a wacky singleton in a minor key, who seeks love among the footlights and sequins.

Although Zellweger's outstanding performance is the single thing that makes

"Judy" worth seeing, I'm not convinced it was much of a stretch for her.

Zellweger expertly telegraphs Garland's fragility and hopefulness. Yet "Judy," notwithstanding its big band and bright lights, is ultimately joyless. The suffering inflicted upon the brittle and broken star is more painful to watch than all of the relentless gore and violence of this summer's action movies combined.

Under its glamorous sparkle, "Judy" has the same despairing tone as the downer, "Can You Ever Forgive Me?"

One can't help but think, too, of Michael Jackson, who was also felled by a London tour and robbed by fame of any kind of childhood.

The red-carpet years are not covered in this movie. "Judy" begins with a significant setback in Garland's life and continues, one bad choice after another, until the star is gone.

It feels gratuitously voyeuristic to wallow in Garland's misery. All she ever wanted was for us to get happy.