‘Promising Young Woman:’ A mesmeric, Oscar-tipped performance by Carey Mulligan

CHENNAI: Director Emerald Fennell’s debut feature “Promising Young Woman” is in the Academy Awards race in a multitude of categories, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actress and Best Original Screenplay. Penned by Fennell herself, it is Carey Mulligan’s work all the way, and she gives an Oscar-worthy performance as Ohio-based Cassandra Thomas.

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A medical school dropout, Cassandra is 30 with no boyfriend and no real friends, much to the anxiety of her doting parents. Of course, there is a reason for this. Years ago, her med-school classmate. Al Monroe (Chris Lowell), sexually assaulted her best

friend, Nina Fisher. A corrupt lawyer and the school’s uncaring administration let Monroe off and left him not feeling the faintest sense of remorse. Cassandra, a promising student, dropped out and withdrew from social life.

Against this backdrop, which is gradually revealed in the nearly two-hour movie, we watch Cassandra make a weekly trip to a bar until a “friendly” male attempts to take advantage of her inebriated state, before she reveals she is in perfect control of her faculties, having pretended to be tipsy to lull predators into a false sense of security.

The plot is extremely gripping. We watch with trepidation as Cassandra challenges men, who on the surface seem so jovial, friendly and highbrow — the ultimate “nice guys” — until the moment of reckoning, when they fail to do the right thing.

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Cassandra’s life of solitude is upended, however, when she re-connects with Ryan Cooper (Bo Burnham), an old classmate who finds a chink in her armor. The pair does have genuine chemistry — enough for a whole film on them.

“Promising Young Woman” is not about their romance, however. It is about Cassandra, it is about Mulligan, and audiences will be amazed to see her comic side in a film on such dark subject matter — it is a mesmeric performance.

The soundtrack is moody and meaningful — songs like “It’s Rainin’ Men” and Britney Spears’ “Toxic,” fill the air, as well as Paris Hilton’s cheery pop numbers that are foot-tapping but jarring.