

'Johnny English Strikes Again' misses the mark

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 26 October 2018 06:33



Rating: «« out of «««««

Running Time: 88 minutes

It has been 15 years since British secret agent Johnny English (who was no doubt a parody of James Bond) first debuted on the big screen. Frankly, I can't specifically remember much at all about the original film, but it was successful enough to spawn a 2011 sequel that fared equally well at the box office.

After a profitable run in other parts of the world, this week sees the release of *Johnny English Strikes Again* in North America.

When a mysterious computer hacker releases the names of every MI7 operative to the public, the U.K.'s prime minister (Emma Thompson) is forced to take very drastic measures. First, she must reinstate and assign ex-agent and now schoolteacher Johnny English (Rowan Atkinson) to the case.

With trusty tech genius Bough (Ben Miller) by his side, the protagonist heads across Europe to investigate the cyber-attack. While the nervous prime minister considers privatizing the government servers under Silicon Valley entrepreneur Jason Volta (Jake Lacy), English faces off against Russian spy Ophelia (Olga Kurylenko), who may be partly responsible for the breach in intelligence.

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There are three jokes in the film that work quite effectively.

One involves English and Bough going undercover and taking on the personas of French waiters. The lead’s attempts at serving up a flame-based dish offers up a chuckle.

Another bit later on features the pair captured while attempting to sneak onto a boat where they believe the online attack originated. After using a loud explosive to break free from the brig, English screams instructions to his compatriot while trying to sneak around the ship unnoticed.

The third and funniest sequence involves the lead accidentally ingesting an amphetamine and unwittingly taking down an assassin multiple times while busting ridiculous movies on a dancefloor.

These moments are undeniably silly and pedestrian, yet Atkinson’s physical comedy skills and bizarre gesticulations somehow manage to sell the gags.

This is clearly a film made with younger audiences in mind, as much of the humor revolves around goofy, broadly played pratfalls and dopey situations.

While there are a few bits of inspired lunacy, three jokes do not make a great comedy. It’s unfortunate that the rest of the movie never really amounts to much. Outside the previously described segments and an odd chuckle here and there, most of the gags as written are telegraphed and land with an obvious thud.

The idea of bringing back an incompetent agent trained in outmoded ways and placing him in the modern world could have resulted in a lot of contrast, conflict and great material, but the script always takes the easy route.

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When an interesting scenario comes around, it is played for a quick laugh before the story moves on, rarely building on the gag and taking it to potentially humorous extremes. Instead, the story’s protagonist simply bumbles around, accidentally manages to get the job done and occasionally acts superior to others about his approach. One can get away with that kind of a joke once or twice, but in this film it all becomes repetitive very quickly.

In the end, *Johnny English Strikes Again* is perfectly satisfied in aiming low and allowing the natural talent of the leads to make up for the various deficiencies in the screenplay. They are all excellent performers and manage to eke out a laugh or two, but they can’t overcome such a lackluster screenplay that never wants to get too wild or parody its subject with any real bite.

Like the other films in this series, one will have great difficulty remembering much about it after the credits roll.

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