

Rating: «« out of «««««

Running Time: 106 minutes

For most kids, reading a book by Roald Dahl is a rite of passage. He has entertained generations of kids with titles like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, James and the Giant Peach, Fantastic Mr. Fox, The BFG* , and *Matilda* among many others. As a reader, the author was anything but patronizing to youngsters and it didn’t matter if his characters were children or adults … if you were rude and/or selfish, you were likely going to get a darkly humorous comeuppance. His book
The Witches
was expertly translated to screen once already in 1990 (Dahl reportedly disliked it, but hated most adaptations of his work).

This new update on the story is technically accomplished and may entertain youngsters unfamiliar with the tale. However, it’s a far safer and blander take on the material than its cinematic predecessor.

Narrated by Chris Rock, this version follows an unnamed boy (Jahzir Bruno) who loses his parents in a car accident and is sent to Alabama to live with his kindly grandmother (Octavia Spencer). She tries to cheer the lonesome child and even gives him some pet mice, but soon realizes that they may be under threat from sinister witches. Knowing a great deal about

sorceresses and their evil ways, Grandma whisks the boy away to a fancy resort where she believes they will both be safe. However, the boy quickly realizes that there is a witch convention taking place at the hotel.

He overhears the Grand High Witch (Anne Hathaway) and unveils her plan to use chocolate tainted with a secret formula to transform all children into rodents. The boy immediately becomes a target and must survive many trials (including being turned into a mouse) to foil their plan.

Admittedly, this reviewer is a fan of the original film and it’s a little unfair to compare this version to an older one which was perfect in many respects (especially in its specific tone and humor). One interesting alteration this time out, is a change in setting from Europe to the U.S., which initially allows this film an opportunity to distinguish itself. The Alabama backdrop allows for the witches to pull some unique and different spells on victims early on. Visual effects are also updated and the computer-generated transformations from person to mouse are more elaborate.

There are also some impressive shots that follow the little heroes around as they try to move through the hotel without getting caught.

However, not all of the alterations work. A new character has been wedged into the story to assist the boy on his magical journey. The explanation for some of this person’s behavior early in the film doesn’t make sense, seeing as the figure could have helped the protagonist out earlier. Truthfully, the same can be said of Grandma, who is overly sweet and holds off explaining the world of witches for far too long.

Even the villains could do with a little more subtlety. They’re outspoken and blunt about their ulterior motives of wiping out kids, even while in public in the hotel’s lobby. And despite the best efforts of Hathaway, the Grand High Witch is over-the-top. In fact, the character rages and causes destruction during the conference itself that is never addressed (one imagines the staff of this hoity-toity establishment would be furious).

It’s all done to be funny, but the behavior doesn’t garner many yuks.

To some degree, this is a story that could have dealt with issues like grief, mortality and metaphorical threats to children, using a dose of dark humor to do so in a way that isn’t overly downbeat. This particular adaptation wants to avoid handling these concepts, merely hinting at them in the background. And while the film’s finale is, in fact, closer to the original book than the previous version, it somehow manages to feel more like a set-up for a sequel than an opportunity to tackle these themes.

This is a lavish adaptation that looks slick and will be reasonably entertaining to kids without scaring them. Sadly, in doing so, it skirts around the complex story elements. *The Witches* ultimately starts lagging and ends up being an unadventurous and middle-of-the-road fantasy flick. If you don’t mind a family film with a bit more edge and bite, you are better off visiting Netflix and streaming the 1990 feature.

Those witches may have been crueler, but they’re a lot more entertaining to watch.

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By Glenn Kay
For the Sun