

Take a trip inside ‘Nightmare Alley’ with some geeks, grifters

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««««

out of «««««

Running Time: 150 minutes

This feature from Searchlight Pictures opens nationwide at cinemas on Dec. 17.

For many, the term “geek” refers to a nerdy, eccentric person with quirky interests. But this definition for the word is a fairly recent one. Not so long ago, it meant something entirely different and far more unsettling. Filmmaker Guillermo del Toro certainly wants to bring the original meaning back with his new film “Nightmare Alley,” as well as take viewers to the days of second-rate carnivals populated with a few shady characters.

Based on the acclaimed 1946 novel by William Lindsay Gresham, the story follows Stan Carlisle (Bradley Cooper), a man running from a dark past. He skulks through a traveling carnival, charming owner Clem Hoately (Willem Dafoe) and earning himself a position on the staff. After learning everything he can about the carnies, he turns his attention to befriending a mentalist Pete Krumbein (David Strathairn) and his wife Zeena (Toni Collette). After a warning about not using the gift to manipulate clients hoping to communicate with deceased loved ones, the lead

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is taught the trade and becomes an excellent psychic performer.

He woos a sweet performer named Molly (Rooney Mara) and convinces her to leave with him to start their own show. Despite their success, Carlisle isn't satisfied, befriending psychologist Dr. Lilith Ritter (Cate Blanchett) and teaming with her to grift Chicago's most powerful citizens.

Cooper is playing a con artist who isn't the most likable of protagonists, but still possesses enough charisma to keep viewers watching and help introduce us into the world of carnivals. In fact, the entire cast is excellent and appears to be having fun living in the unique, circus-like onscreen environment.

As one might already have guessed, the movie itself looks stunning, with phenomenal production design and photography. Early on, the bright lights and dark colors of the carnival backdrop make a striking impression. As the story progresses, even the art deco city buildings and offices pop off the screen.

The world is captivating, but there is a minor flaw or two with this adaptation. While this reviewer hasn't read the novel, he assumes that all involved likely followed the source material very closely. The unfortunate drawback is that there is a lot of time spent with Carlisle working at the carnival. It's all interesting, but there are so many different performers introduced, that it takes significant time for the grifting and main conflict to arise.

Yes, a great deal of what is presented in the first half of the movie is important to the story. But given the direction in which it ultimately heads, one or two of the supporting parts could have been clipped down or perhaps even removed.

Despite the pacing issues, the movie is still fascinating to witness. The second half is where things really hit their stride. We witness Carlisle toss aside the advice of those who taught him and see the ramifications of his decision. He must also deal with those attempting to expose him as a fraud, endure trouble within his own relationship due to his scheming and watch him engage with some very dangerous people during a climactic scam.

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There are some enjoyably dark turns and tension mounts as the protagonist gets in over his head, but still doggedly attempts to win the day.

Early sections of "Nightmare Alley" do require patience, but the old carnival backdrop and its strongman, the memorable "geek" and other performers manage to draw and hold attention. Things really get cooking as the movie progresses, leading to some tense and nail-biting final confrontations. It might not be a perfect experience, but it is a fine film. This reviewer wouldn't be surprised to see the movie earn some nominations in technical categories in the coming awards season at the very least.

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