

'Death on the Nile' brings a fresh take to a Christie classic

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

out of «««««

Running Time: 127 minutes

This film opens exclusively in movie theaters on Feb. 11.

When it comes to murder/mysteries, no one can top Agatha Christie. The late author's written works revolving around private detective Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple are so iconic and beloved that they have been adapted to film and television on multiple occasions.

"Death on the Nile" serves as one of the most famous books in the author's resume. So, what can one do to differentiate and add a few twists to the story?

If you are director/star Kenneth Branagh, the answer is changing the histories of a few suspects and adding an elaborate backstory about the lead character's facial hair. Strangely enough, the approach ultimately works reasonably well.

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The tale finds Hercule Poirot (Branagh) vacationing in Egypt. While visiting the Pyramids of Giza, he runs into close friend Bouc (Tom Bateman). The lead is invited to join the elaborate wedding celebration of Linnet Ridgeway-Doyle (Gal Gadot) and Simon Doyle (Armie Hammer).

While the wealthy couple are thrilled to be newly married, after meeting Poirot they share their concern about Jacqueline de Bellefort (Emma Mackey). She is Doyle’s ex-fiancée and is stalking them, determined to win back the love of her life.

In frustration, the anxious newlyweds take their guests on a cruise along the Nile to continue the festivities, but it isn’t long before someone onboard turns up dead. Poirot grills the various attendees in order to find the murderer, uncovering various motives and revelations about everyone present.

As mentioned, many viewers may already be familiar with the story, so the mystery itself and grand reveal may not be as big of a shock as it might be with an original tale. That may be why the adaptation is so dependent on an array of stars and established faces to help carry the material.

Just like “Murder on the Orient Express” from 2017 (the previous entry in this updated series), this movie boasts an impressive cast of suspects that include Annette Bening, Russell Brand, Ali Fazal, Dawn French, Jennifer Saunders, Rose Leslie, Sophie Okonedo, Letitia Wright and many others.

Clearly, they’re all having fun with the material and at times push the interpersonal drama to melodramatic heights, but regardless it’s still enjoyable to watch these red herrings glower at one another.

Despite making jokes earlier in this review about a significant backstory regarding Poirot’s over-the-top facial hair, this added material actually helps the movie in surprising ways. While it may initially seem silly, the story of why the detective chose to grow a mustache does land and ends up adding a level of melancholy and humanity to the character that wouldn’t otherwise exist.

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And of course, when he isn't quietly ruining choices he made before becoming a private investigator, Branagh is a blast to watch as he brazenly makes accusations towards each and every passenger in order to unveil the truth.

There is heavy use of CGI technology in order to depict Egypt in the 1930s and not all of the special effects look convincing. At times, it really is evident that the characters are standing in front of a blue screen with the exotic locale added in behind them. But the odd shot is still impressive to behold and all of the interior sets, including those of the elaborate sea vessel, are strikingly photographed.

Admittedly, "Death on the Nile" is far from a masterpiece. The film is corny and exaggerated at times, and it even takes quite a while for the story to present the main murder that pushes the plot forward.

However, it is also an amusingly extravagant, well-paced, old-fashioned thriller that will provide appropriate popcorn entertainment to mystery fans. Hopefully the filmmakers will dig a little deeper in the Christie catalog next time out, and give audiences a less-familiar story with a few more unexpected twists.

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