

'Haunted Mansion' doesn't outdo the real Disney attraction

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

out of <<<<<<

Running Time: 122 minutes

This feature from Walt Disney Pictures will be released exclusively in theaters on Friday, July 28.

For the last decade, Disney has been on a tear creating live-action adaptations of animated properties. These films have gotten so much attention that many may have forgotten the studios' sideline of making movies out of their theme park rides. And some of these projects are even more daunting, considering that there typically is very little detailed backstory involved in a 10-minute attraction.

The 2003 effort *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* was something of an anomaly in that it successfully translated to the big screen. However, its follow-ups and other titles like *The Country Bears*, *Tomorrowland*, and

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Jungle Cruise

haven't matched the studio's original pirate-themed adventure.

Disney's latest attempt is *Haunted Mansion*, based on the extremely popular ride. It's actually the second film based on the concept (a 2003 effort starring Eddie Murphy was a critical flop). This version isn't perfect either, but it is an improvement that delivers some chuckles.

Former scientist Ben Matthias (LaKeith Stanfield) is a grieving widower who spends his days going through the motions as a New Orleans tour guide. One night, he's visited by Father Kent (Owen Wilson), a holy man familiar with Ben's innovative design for a camera that can capture images of ghosts. The priest promises a major payday if Ben takes photographs at a mansion thought to be haunted.

Despite reservations, the lead accepts the offer and meets terrified homeowner Gabbie (Rosario Dawson) and her son, Travis (Chase W. Dillon). Sure enough, the house does possess supernatural figures, including the threatening Hatbox Ghost (Jared Leto) and deceased medium Madame Leota (Jamie Lee Curtis). Ben and Father Kent convince psychic Harriet (Tiffany Haddish) and a local professor Bruce Davis (Danny DeVito) to help them square off against paranormal forces.

The screenplay attempts to wedge in portions of the ride with a more detailed history of the mansion and its many spirits. While the emphasis is on humor rather than scares, the film does try to address Ben's personal tragedy, the reason behind Travis' shyness, and the personal issues troubling numerous supporting characters.

Ben's arc is certainly relatable and the character is engaging to watch. Young Travis also makes a great impression, mixing some wonderfully funny reactions to supernatural phenomena alongside heavier material relating to his introverted nature. And Father Kent's backstory ends up being quite amusing, adding some effective humor to the scenario.

But truth be told, it's all a bit overstuffed. Even the editing comes across as choppy as it tries to juggle its characters, both living and deceased, with references to the ride. Still, at least attempts are made to develop each mansion visitor.

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Additionally, the cast are so talented that they make the most of the story's comedic aspects. In fact, many of the film's finest moments involve humorous comments between characters as they acknowledge the bizarreness of the situation.

It is also fun to see recreations of bits from the theme park attraction, including some familiar faces haunting the hallways. These moments are entertaining early on, but there is a great deal of computer-generated imagery that continues to increase as the story develops. Some bits involving spirits causing trouble outside the mansion are striking. But not all of it looks convincing and the elaborate finale in particular goes overboard with CGI effects.

In the end, the film is predictable, but offers a couple of minor twists involving its characters and their motivations. And the performers themselves are so strong that more of the humor lands than one would expect, ultimately earning it a minor recommendation. *Haunted Mansion* doesn't outdo the real Disney experience and doesn't make a long-lasting impression, but it delivers enough effective moments to entertain families looking for some ghostly fun.

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