

'Babylon' is an overly grandiose endeavor

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 06 January 2023 03:36



Rating: <<<

out of <<<<<<

Running Time: 188 minutes

This feature from Paramount Pictures opened at theaters on December 23.

Sometimes, advertising about a movie can be misleading.

The new film *Babylon* has been described in some circles as a drama/comedy set during the days of early Hollywood that depicts the outrageous excesses and decadence of stars and producers. Yes, there is a wild party presented early on, but the movie is actually a story about various silent performers and producers adapting to change when sound technology is introduced (one imagines this plot synopsis wasn't considered exciting enough). And it also tries to sandwich in a message about the power of cinema and how it continues to inspire viewers.

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As you can already imagine, it is incredibly ambitious and has big ideas, but has trouble focusing its attention and ultimately comes off as something of a jumble.

The story begins with young Mexican-American Manny Torres (Diego Calva) arriving at a swanky Hollywood party filled with free love, drugs and hedonistic pursuits. Once there, he meets aspiring actress Nellie LaRoy (Margot Robbie) and immediately falls for her. Manny becomes determined to find his way into the movie production business. While at the party, he befriends star Jack Conrad (Brad Pitt) and gets a crash course on the industry the following day.

The feature also introduces other unique characters, including black trumpet player Sidney Palmer (Jovan Adepo) and cabaret singer/intertitle writer Lady Fay Zhu (Li Jun Li). We follow their careers over the following years. When sound recording is introduced, the group is forced to deal with this dramatic change in the movie business.

This film is overflowing with ideas both on paper and in execution. It looks great, with impressive long takes featuring roving cameras capturing a chaotic party and movie shoots. There are some funny moments during both Manny's and Nellie's first day on the job, with multiple silent projects being lensed at the same time.

When the leads are making their mark early in the film, the energy level is extraordinarily high and the performances brash. It works for a little while, but as the picture progresses past the hour mark into the second and third hour, the episodic format, number of characters and exaggerated stories of the leads becomes fatiguing.

The characters ultimately bark and yell at each other continuously. In certain circumstances, the technique is used for comedic effect, but more serious and dramatic moments are just as ear-piercing. In fact, by the middle of the movie seemingly every scene ends with a character shouting at the top of their lungs and/or physically lashing out. The reactions are so over-the-top so early that there is nowhere grander for the performers to go as the story progresses and it simply feels like an overextended scream-fest.

One could argue that the title is embracing the excesses of the era, but the technique distances the viewer and leaves one less engaged in the drama or emotional stakes.

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At least there are a few quieter moments later in the film that are on point. When Conrad struggles to adapt to new challenges in his field, the depressed actor discusses concerns for his future with entertainment journalist Elinor St. John (Jean Smart). It's a strong scene. Additionally, a request asked of jazz player Palmer and his quiet frustration end up effectively highlighting issues of inequality.

But besides these individual moments, the tone is hyperbolic. It also ends on an extended tangent that rationalizes a few of the issues it brings up, catches viewers up with cinema to the present day and states that movies have a lasting and powerful impact on society. It is a nice thought and true to a degree, although as presented it does come across as a bit egotistical and not without its flaws (considering that the story primarily depicts an era in which 50% to 75% of all titles produced are now deemed lost forever, with later titles in danger as well).

Babylon is certainly epic in scale. It contains a few striking moments and amusing observations about the early days of filmmaking. Sadly, the movie is also an overly grandiose endeavor that bites off more material than it can chew and doesn't engage very strongly on an emotional level.

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