

‘Fate of the Furious’ up in the air

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Still plenty of fan-loving, over-the-top, speed-filled action

Rating: «« out of 4 stars

Running Time: 136 min.

After eight movies and a set up for more sequels after the close of *The Fate of the Furious*, I've frankly run out of "family" jokes to open my reviews with (instead, I'll just suggest playing a drinking game based around the number of times it's referenced). As a result, by now everything about this franchise feels pretty familiar. The latest installment does deserve a bit of credit, however, for being a slight improvement over the previous edition (at least, by my estimation).

This time out, Dominic Toretto (Vin Diesel) has moved to Cuba and is living happily with significant other Letty Ortiz (Michelle Rodriguez). Things quickly change with the arrival of Cipher (Charlize Theron). Blackmailing the protagonist, she forces Dom into going rogue and doing her bidding, which involves stealing EMP technology and important data that will help her with a nefarious plot to take control of a nuclear weapon.

In the process, Dom must also square off against his old team and associates, including Luke Hobbs (Dwayne Johnson), Tej Parker (Ludacris), Roman (Tyrese Gibson), Ramsey (Nathalie Emmanuel) and Mr. Nobody (Kurt Russell). Also in on the conflict is arch nemesis Deckard Shaw (Jason Statham).

As expected, the action is well-handled and serves as the highlight of the production. The vehicle stunt work (augmented by computer generated effects) is zippy and often outrageous to witness. The fight choreography between cast members is equally impressive. On the technical front, there are also a few clever camera angles and shots that feature the camera flipping over and occasionally moving along with the punches and blows. And the scenic Cuba and Iceland (subbing for Russia) locations make for a nice backdrop.

My big issue with the last film was that the story was about two guys looking for special technology that would allow them to kill each other – it offered no real threat or danger to the world in general. Here, Cipher's motivation is for governments to be held "accountable" for their actions. Her way of going about it is more than odd ... blackmailing someone into doing the job on her behalf appears contradictory to the message being relayed. And the details of her nuclear launch are even vaguer. But then again, logic was never a strong suit in this series. Amusingly, one of her nastiest deeds actually helps save a character from an awkward conversation and life decision. But at least there's an attempt to up the ante, even if events are completely nonsensical.

Still, this is some really, really ridiculous stuff that is impossible to take seriously, even when it's clear that the filmmakers want us to feel the lead's pain with big emotional beats. As for humor, the one-liners land every once in a while from the game cast, but overall the writing is still stiff and wooden. More of the attempts at witty banter sound dim and fall flat. At least an unusual situation here and there provides a chuckle, including a fight with one character handling very unusual cargo.

This is one of the biggest franchises in film history and it looks as if nothing can really stop its forward momentum. For the time being, the movies themselves are critic-proof. And if you're a fan of the series, *The Fate of the Furious* should satisfy as ridiculous popcorn entertainment. Personally, I liked it a little more than the last, although the entire enterprise has yet to win me over.

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