

***Rating:** «« **out of** «««««*

Running Time: 114 min.

First published in 1934, Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* is perhaps one of the most well known mystery books ever written. Over the years, it has been adapted for film and TV on numerous occasions. The latest attempt is certainly a lavish and pretty one. However, the movie suffers from being overly faithful to the occasionally creaky, train-based source material. It's capably made, but doesn't do enough to stand apart from all of the other adaptations.

The story begins with detective Hercule Poirot (Kenneth Branagh) wrapping up an investigation and preparing himself for a much needed vacation. He winds up on the Orient Express in the company of several eccentric passengers. A particularly slimy traveler named Edward Ratchett (Johnny Depp) tells the detective that he fears for his life and offers a sum of money for Poirot to keep an eye on him. The protagonist refuses, a murder occurs and an avalanche stops the train from moving forward. Poirot is begged by friend and rail company manager Bouc (Tom Bateman) to help quickly resolve the matter. Unfortunately, there are so many suspects (played by Penelope Cruz, Willem Dafoe, Judi Dench, Michelle Pfeiffer, Josh Gad, Derek Jaacobi, Leslie Odom Jr., Daisy Ridley, Olivia Colman and many others) that identifying the killer proves challenging.

It appears that the biggest upgrade in the latest edition is the impressive photography. Early on, there are numerous lengthy master shots that follow Poirot as he enters the train and moves through the cars, passing and introducing himself to various characters. The movie features plenty of interesting and adventurous camera angles and some scenic (if digitally created) views to add some visual flair. Of course, director Branagh saves the most notable visual gag for himself in the form of an incredibly exaggerated moustache.

The hero is given some amusingly blunt comments and observations, with perhaps the best one arriving as he is paired with a surprised bunkmate. Unfortunately, the all-star cast adds a layer of distraction from the story. A few come off well (I actually liked Depp's gruff, mobster-type affectations), but it really does look like a group of celebrities playing dress-up, as opposed to meeting authentic and believable characters. This and mechanizations of the plot all lend a bit of a staginess to the proceedings. So, despite the fact that the train is stuck and there has been a brutal murder, viewers won't end up feeling much fear or concern for the safety of the hero.

With so many suspects and motivations, much of the movie is played out with the protagonist conducting brief interviews. That isn't a whole lot of time spent with each supporting character (which is probably why stars were cast in the roles to begin with) and several still feel underdeveloped. When all is revealed, there's an attempt to have viewers empathize with the guilty party and the tragedy that caused them to take action. Sadly, it doesn't make much of an emotional impact.

Ultimately, this isn't really the fault of the filmmaking. As shocking as it may be to suggest, it's the source material that is too worn and familiar. The finale includes a set up for a sequel. Should this effort prove successful at the box office, the makers would be advised to throw in more surprises, or perhaps even pull events from less recognizable source material. In the meantime, *Murder on the Orient Express* is enjoyable in the moment, but will quickly fade from memory like a train chugging into the distance.

By Glenn Kay
For the Sun