

Rating: *«««* ***out of*** *«««««*

Running Time: 130 minutes

I’ll be honest and write that I didn’t hold out much hope for a sequel to a Disney family classic from 54 years ago. Thankfully, the new film *Mary Poppins Returns* is a pleasant surprise. It may not live up to the original, but it does provide plenty sweetness and visual pop (even throwing in an unexpected cameo for good measure), providing families with plenty of fun this holiday season.

The plot itself isn’t exactly light and frothy. It follows Michael Banks (Ben Whishaw) the grown-up son from the original film, still living in the family home. Now a widower and single father of three, trouble arises when the bank informs him they are about to foreclose on the residence. Michael and his sister Jane (Emily Mortimer) desperately try to find a solution to the financial crisis, although all hope seems lost.

Spirits rise, however, with the unexpected arrival of Mary Poppins (Emily Blunt).

Stunned that the nanny wasn’t simply a figment of their imaginations, the siblings welcome Poppins in. The sitter takes care of the kids, whisking them to fantastic locales as the deadline looms closer.

This effort seeks to emulate the style of the original feature and does so unexpectedly well. Blunt hits the right notes as an appropriately firm, yet kindhearted Poppins.

The movie also looks striking and many of the recreations may trigger a nostalgic reaction. Musical numbers are solid, but it’s difficult to gauge whether there are any earworms quite as memorable as some of the original’s best songs.

At least the big refrains are fun to watch, with very elaborate dance choreography that includes an entire cadre of lamplighters (including *Hamilton* creator Lin-Manuel Miranda) swinging around poles, as well as a tune with all the characters singing and floating above London while hanging onto balloons. These sequences are all very well realized and technically impressive.

For this reviewer, the film’s highlight was the scenes that combine the human characters with hand-drawn animation. They perfectly emulate the original and are a joy to witness.

The movie hits its peak as Poppins and the kids enter a bowl and find themselves speaking, singing and eventually becoming involved in a chase with various animal characters (who serve as something of a metaphor for what’s happening to the family in London). This sequence is an absolute blast.

Admittedly, there are some minor issues.

There’s a bizarrely high number of references to Royal Doulton ceramics and the product placement is occasionally jarring. Even though it all results in the film’s best sequence, the name is mentioned a few too many times (those looking for a new drinking game should even be wary, you’ll be completely under the table by the time the characters have exited the bowl).

And despite a nice airborne finale, the movie does seem to run out of steam and momentum toward the close.

Still, even I’ll admit this follow-up is much better than predicted.

Kids will no doubt enjoy much of what they see, and parents who fondly remember the original won’t be rolling their eyes at the attempts to recreate the same kind of magic. If anything, adults will be impressed by just how much it gets right. Like its lead character, *Mary Poppins Returns* breezes in and is a surprising amount of fun.

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By Glenn Kay

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