

The latest 'Shaft' is a letdown

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

Running Time: 111 minutes

First debuting in 1971, hard-nosed private detective Shaft has entertained audiences for decades, not only in the first trilogy of films (not to mention a brief TV series), but also in a 2000 remake that introduced the next generation of the family. The latest *Shaft* marks the fifth cinematic outing of the character and adds more relatives to the mix. But despite the talented and charismatic cast assembled, the screenplay fails to maximize the story's potential to provide action thrills, nor does it go out of its way to address the social themes one would expect. As a result, this is the least persuasive entry in the franchise.

Button-down, reserved John Shaft Jr. (Jesse T. Usher) is a data analyst and new employee at the FBI, but feels unappreciated by his superiors. When a childhood friend dies under strange circumstances, the protagonist tries to find out what really happened. After hitting a dead end he reaches out to his estranged father, John Shaft II (Samuel L. Jackson). The pair soon uncover a criminal element that may tie into an event from the senior Shaft's past that splintered the family. As they speak with suspects, the leads try to work out their personal differences and Dad attempts to help his son woo potential romantic interest, Sasha (Alexandra Shipp). Eventually, clan patriarch John Shaft (Richard Roundtree) enters the fray to help take down the bad guys.

Those familiar with the series might remember that the first movie involved the character solving

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a crime to prevent a race war, while others followed the hero taking on the mob, a human smuggling ring, and even stopping an entitled racist with ties to a drug lord. While these previous chapters were sharp and edgy and put Shaft in some dangerous situations with memorably nasty, posturing heavies, this follow-up is decidedly more routine and run-of-the-mill.

In fact, it commits the cardinal sin of action movies in not offering an equally notable antagonist. There is a crime lord whom the elder suggests may be responsible for the death. We hear references and see pictures of the figure, but never interact with him, at least until late in the film. As such, he doesn't make an impression in any way, shape or form and never feels particularly threatening.

Instead, the movie follows the leads as they interview various figures, but most of it is little more than conversations and light bickering between father and son. Their personalities are so different that it offers some potential for conflict and humor. Yet we don't hear all that many zingers. Mostly, the fatherly private eye tells Shaft Jr. how to act masculine; the son capitulates, only to note later that he doesn't approve of the methods being employed. It's all very routine and far less of it makes an impact than one would expect.

Even the shoot-outs and action scenes are remarkably brief and will do little to raise the pulse of viewers. As previously mentioned, the leads are likable, so they do manage to sell an amusing line here and there. But the story they've been saddled with is, frankly, dull and generic. This isn't a terrible movie, but it is a forgettable one and at times, this reviewer felt like he was watching a TV pilot with some cussing thrown in, rather than a big cinematic rebirth of a classic character. Sadly, there's a lack of spark to the latest take on *Shaft* that will leave most viewers feeling let down.

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