

'The Old Guard' is a little musty

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

Running Time: 125 minutes

The following feature is currently available for streaming on Netflix.

There can be only one ... actually, four ... make that five ... or perhaps six. Those who recognize the first part of the previous sentence will know it from *Highlander*, a cult action/fantasy film from 1986 about immortal warriors. Based on a graphic novel, *The Old Guard* borrows the very same concept, adds more characters and attempts to modernize the story. There are a few good ideas hidden in the bulk of it, but this take doesn't make the most of its dramatic potential.

The end result comes across more like a *Highlander* sequel than a new and exciting update on the notion.

Andy (Charlize Theron) is a brazen and blunt mercenary who lives with her talented crew comprised of Booker (Matthias Schoenaerts), Joe (Marwan Kenzari) and Nicky (Luca Marinelli). The group takes down bad guys and by their own assertion, fights for what they believe is right.

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They all also happen to be immortals. When independent contractor Copley (Chiwetel Ejiofor) hires the team to rescue a group of Sudanese students from a militia, it draws the attention of a sinister pharmaceutical company head named Merrick (Harry Melling).

He wants to capture them, study them and presumably develop a healing serum from their blood. The heroes also encounter a U.S. Marine named Nile (KiKi Layne) who shows similar healing powers. Andy and the group take her in and teach her about the condition.

As it turns out, there actually isn't a whole lot to discover. Members of the group have been around for centuries and don't know how they came to be or why. The leads also state that while they usually heal immediately from their injuries, the power does eventually disappear. When this happens, the members will suddenly become mortal and expire from any new and deadly wounds.

Instead of regularly making a small cut on themselves to make sure they're still healing, the ones who do die tend to go out violently in battle.

There are a lot of characters introduced and the movie struggles to set itself up efficiently. The cast are all charismatic enough and the action scenes display impressive choreography as the five protagonists swirl around targets and use hand-to-hand combat techniques and gunplay to wipe them out. Yet, one of the odd factors working against this feature is the fact that there are so many of them all hanging out together. Those wondering about the unfortunate ramifications of immortality, including loneliness and losing everyone you've come to love as they grow old, is briefly addressed in conversation, but isn't really explored.

Instead, the movie focuses on posturing and beating down enemies.

Since the concept itself is a little fantastic, a certain number of plot holes are to be anticipated. However, they tend to really pile up in this adaptation. This includes how Andy and the others manage to keep themselves secret given their less-than-subtle line of work, as well as the crew's seemingly endless supply of weapons and ammo. Additionally, the pharmaceutical company villain feels one note and bland, at least as written.

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The sneering boss and his army are not nearly as interesting as they could have been. These bad guys are just an endless parade of mortal soldiers who are easily dispatched.

In fact, the biggest miss comes from a supporting character who is woefully underutilized. A flashback details a close friend of Andy named Quynh (Van Veronica Ngo). Through a series of unfortunate events, this person ends up suffering and repeating the same tragic fate. Told over a few short minutes, it's the most original and unique element of the film.

Imagine a story about an immortal suffering endlessly, being driven insane and feeling abandoned by her long-time compatriot, looking for revenge against another of her kind. All the while, her friend harbors feelings of guilt, as well as uncertainty after discovering a newbie and helping the youngster to develop the gift? It would have been a sharper and more focused movie. One assumes they'll likely utilize this subplot for a potential sequel, but here it all feels like a missed opportunity.

Instead, the movie is more interested in setting up a larger canvas with several ancillary characters. As a result, it lacks some of the drive and pacing needed to really engage viewers out of the gate and hook them into this world. *The Old Guard* may offer a few interesting ideas, but much of it ends up feeling tired and a little musty.

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