Rating: «« out of 4 starts

Running Time: 114 min.

I’m not entirely sure that anyone was clamoring for it, but this week we’re receiving yet another sequel. The follow-up to the 2012 *Snow White* film is called *The Huntsman: Winter’s War*. Unfortunately for fans of the first film, the heroine is merely mentioned in passing and only seen once (from behind). Instead, this movie is focused primarily on the title Huntsman (Chris Hemsworth).

Viewers will get a lengthy prologue narrated by what sounds like an uncredited Liam Neeson. We’re told that Ravenna (Charlize Theron), villainess from the first film, also had a sister named Freya (Emily Blunt). Devastated by the sudden death of her baby, Freya transforms into the Ice Queen. She begins kidnapping children and training them to be part of an army. Her most talented kids are the title character and young Sara (Jessica Chastain). The two quickly fall for one another, but in a kingdom where love is forbidden, it isn’t long before tragedy strikes.

It’s too much information to relay right off the bat and it all is clumsily mashed together. When the main plot finally arrives, we learn that Snow White’s kingdom is falling into disarray and that Freya’s armies plan on invading. The Huntsman is tasked with relocating evil Ravenna’s old mirror to remote location where its nasty influence will no longer hurt Snow. Apparently, the job mostly involves fighting off some chimps.

As mentioned, it seems as if a good thirty minutes transpire before we get to the central

motivation of the story. So much back story is given that every element feels telegraphed. All of the big surprises thrust at viewers later in the movie are less than shocking... in fact, they’re completely predictable. One wonders why the filmmakers didn’t begin the movie with the mission and slowly reveal the nefarious powers and influences behind it, rather than spelling everything out so bluntly in the overextended first act.

Unfortunately, the result is an adventure that never feels particularly urgent or exciting. The actors aren’t the problem here. They do their best to deliver some remarkably creaky dialogue about the power of love as an unstoppable force. Nion (Nick Frost) also appears with newcomer Griff (Rob Brydon) to provide some much-needed comic relief, even if only a fraction of the gags hit the mark.

Sara isn’t particularly well written either. It’s tough to watch a character who lives in a world filled with magic unable to believe that her emotions could have been manipulated by an ice queen with supernatural abilities. And even though the triumphant message is well intentioned, these themes are too simple for a movie that purports to be giving us a dark, grittier and more adult update of the story.

The one big positive is that the movie at least looks lavish. As with the previous installment, the costuming and the elaborate sets look impressive, particularly Freya’s frozen, icicle-covered fortress. Characters are turned to ice and other substances before being shattered and splitting apart spectacularly into little pieces. Even though the film is dramatically inert, the visuals are strong.

Ultimately, the story is a jumble and isn’t well constructed enough to grasp. There are so many awkward passages that the best efforts of the cast can’t even save it. *The Huntsman: Winter’s War* may be well produced, but the end result is a chilly, unmemorable and unmoving fairy tale.

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For the Sun