

‘xXx: Return of Xander Cage’ delivers muddled action

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «« out of 4 stars

Running Time: 107 min.

Sometimes, the term “they don’t make them like they used to” doesn’t necessarily have a negative connotation. This week brings a new title in the sequels-no-one-was-clamoring-for category. Honestly, does anyone look back at 2002’s *xXx* with an overwhelming feeling of warmth or nostalgia? Well,

xXx:

Return of Xander Cage

assumes that you do. Not only that, but it also doesn’t seem compelled to offer anything fresh or different upon its return.

Truthfully, one can guess the reason that this feature was been seemingly generated out of the blue. Star Vin Diesel’s *Fast & Furious* franchise is nearing its close. This sequel feels like an obvious and less-than-genuine attempt to start up a new line of films to keep the revenue coming in for a few more years. In has a similar format and plot elements. Were it not for a lack of automobiles on display, one might think they were watching a low-rent follow-up to that series.

What little story there is involves a sinister piece of technology that can alter operating systems and cause satellites to crash to the Earth with the simple push of a button. A new handler (Toni Collette) for the covert *xXx* program needs “the best” in order to recover the item. She doesn’t believe reports that Xander Cage (Diesel) has died and sets out to find him. It’s a pretty easy

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task, since the secret agent has spent the past decade on the beaches of the Dominican Republic, performing elaborate stunts in public and sleeping with locals (who look like supermodels); he's not exactly maintaining a low profile.

Cage decides to take on the assignment, but only if he can recruit new blood (played by an international cast that includes Ruby Rose, Kris Wu and Rory McCann) to help. With the assistance of tech support (Nina Dobrev), the trail leads them to the Philippines, where they discover that some ex... well, ex-xXx operatives (Deepika Padukone, Donnie Yen, Tony Jaa) may be involved. There's little else to the story other than a lot of posturing between the members and speeches about how they all should unite for the greater good. Between the skateboarding tricks, chases with motorcycles on water-skis and shootouts, there are endless double crosses and random allegiance changes.

Some of the over-the-top action moments are passable, but much of it is edited in a hectic and confusing way with some not-so-special special effects. Thankfully, there is one bright spot. Whenever Yen steps in to use his martial arts skills on foes, the movie improves. He's the best thing here, with his speedy reflexes and bone crunching lunges. It's enough to make one wish this follow-up was just about him. Co-star Jaa has a moment or two to shine, but his skills are dreadfully underutilized.

I'm not expecting great acting here, but the writing is pretty leaden and many of the characters (with the exception of Yen) come across as incredibly stiff. By and large, the majority of this tale is played too seriously considering how absurd the material is. Cage walks around with a smug look on his face as every woman he encounters (including a team member or two) throw themselves at him. He barely musters much more than an expression of mild annoyance with each attack. There's no tension here, no danger created and little in the way of thrills. This is a very hectic and loud movie, but it all simply blurs together.

One cameo towards the close is so larger-than-life that it is funny, there's an effective singing gag in the final scene and an amusing comment from a cast member, but it's too little, too late. This is a humdrum and less-than-memorable exercise. The fact that it ends with a team of characters organized to take on new missions filled me with dread. Please, people, let's not extend this franchise out for four or five more movies. Ultimately, *xXx: Return of Xander Cage* doesn't provide enough genuine excitement or even exaggerated, giddy chaos to make any of it worthwhile.

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