

'Downton Abbey: A New Era' struggles to generate tension

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««

out of «««««

Running Time: 125 minutes

This title from Focus Features will open exclusively at movie theaters on May 20.

First premiering on televisions back in 2010, the British series “Downton Abbey” quickly became one of the country’s biggest and most successful exports. After six seasons, a movie was released in 2019 and became one of the biggest hits of the year, grossing more than ten times its production budget. Naturally, the massive revenue generated has now resulted in a new follow-up. “Downton Abbey: A New Era” is set at the end of the 1920s and finds both the Crawley family and their servants dealing with several new and unexpected concerns.

After the household celebrates the wedding of Tom Branson (Allen Leech) to his new bride Lucy (Tuppence Middleton), word comes that family matriarch Violet Grantham (Maggie Smith) has inherited a lavish villa on the French Riviera. This news comes as quite a shock to son Robert Grantham (Hugh Bonneville), who can’t understand why she might have been gifted the property. Robert, his Cora Grantham (Elizabeth McGovern) and other family members decide to

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visit the villa and clear up these questions.

Meanwhile, Lady Mary (Michelle Dockery) decides to allow a film crew to shoot a silent picture at the Grantham home, hoping the location fee will help pay for some much-needed repairs. The downstairs staff are starstruck by the arrival of famous actors and do their best to care for the unusual personalities staying there.

Compared to the previous feature, which included a visit from King George V and an assassination attempt, this follow-up is much breezier. Frankly, the dramatic stakes are low this time out and the film struggles to generate tension.

Robert and his group visiting the French villa receive a few snippy comments and those at the Grantham estate are forced to deal with complications as the silent film production is reworked into a “talkie,” but the tone is relaxed and the problems established are more benign and unsensational than anticipated.

Thankfully, the cast are all charming and do manage to make significantly more of the slight material. In particular, the staff have a few amusing moments dealing with fragile celebrity egos. There are some funny gags as things go wrong during the shoot, including people accidentally interrupting takes. And the unimpressed Violet delivers plenty of disparaging comments about the performers and crew that raise some smiles.

Mr. Molesley (Kevin Doyle) also has a bigger role in this film and engages sympathy as he attempts to help the production get back on its feet. These sequences are entertaining and the movie does manage to tie up some story threads with supporting characters that are pleasing.

Admittedly, later sections try to inject weightier drama as serious health issues among specific characters are revealed. It just comes a little late into the proceedings. These reveals lead to a few emotional outbursts from Robert and others, but even these moments feel overplayed given what has preceded it.

Despite these missteps, the movie again manages to find its footing during the finale with a

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more appropriate send-off for a popular character.

Of course, the stoic characters in this franchise live by manners and proper decorum. But the filmmakers could have made up for this deficit and introduced more uneasy or suspenseful elements into the proceedings like previous chapters have. The movie is a gorgeous travelog that delivers some chuckles and nicely wraps up some lingering storylines.

It's pleasant, genial and reasonable overall, but “Downton Abbey: A New Era” isn't as strong or memorable as the Grantham family's earlier exploits.

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