

'Top Gun: Maverick' provides plenty of thrills

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

out of <<<<<<

Running Time: 131 minutes

This feature from Paramount Pictures opens at cinemas and IMAX screens on Friday, May 27.

Believe it or not, the 1986 smash "Top Gun" was not a critical hit upon its release. But it did break box-office records and make an A-list star of lead Tom Cruise. In fact, the film remains one of the actor's most popular and beloved titles. It has been a long time coming, but a sequel has finally arrived.

"Top Gun: Maverick" continues the protagonist's story. The movie is certain to be a huge success and will definitely please those who adored the first feature. However, this critic was never an enthusiast of the original, even as a youngster. While in many respects the new movie is an improvement, it still retains some of the first film's awkward elements.

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In the 35 years since the previous chapter, Captain Pete «Maverick» Mitchell (Tom Cruise) has never risen in naval aviator ranks. This is partly due to his love of flying, but also because of his disdain for authority figures.

After irking more officials while working as a test pilot, Maverick is given surprising news. His help is required in training an elite group of Top Gun pilots for an impossible mission. Maverick must train and select a group of pilots to enter a foreign country and destroy a well-guarded uranium facility.

Upon arriving in San Diego, he immediately butts heads with Vice Admiral Beau Simpson (Jon Hamm) and rekindles a relationship with bar-owner Penny Benjamin (Jennifer Connelly). He also finds himself in a tense relationship with Bradley «Rooster» Bradshaw (Miles Teller), son of Maverick's deceased friend Goose. The young pilot resents the lead for delaying his progress in the Top Gun program.

The movie truly adores its predecessor and goes out of its way to pay tribute and emulate several aspects of the 80s feature.

Some of these references are effective, like a brief but sweet reunion between Maverick and old rival «Iceman» Kazansky (Val Kilmer). They talk about their lives, mortality and how the hero might make a new start for himself. There isn't any bickering, shouting or high drama between the characters, but it's the most likable and authentic scene in the film.

Other aspects aren't as successful.

With the exception of Rooster, the supporting characters are mostly one-note and spend their time posturing. This aspect isn't helped by the fact that the movie is obsessed with creating montages and music video-esque sequences like those in the original. They're slick, but don't add any weight to the story and make the characters seem overly blasé about the potential life-ending dangers some will be encountering.

And while romantic interest Penny initially seems like a match for Maverick, the character

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ultimately isn't given much to do but swoon whenever the lead appears.

There's also a bit of jingoism present, especially when characters brag about their confirmed kills. Perhaps that is the way real pilots talk, but here it is off-putting.

What can't be denied is the spectacular aerial photography and dogfighting sequences. They are incredible to witness and whenever the action does occur, it's difficult not to be impressed.

The pilot's dangerous mission involves flying at a high rate of speed through a narrow canyon surrounded by enemies and the filmmakers make expert use of the scenario. It is incredibly tense to witness characters attempt maneuvers that push them beyond their personal limits.

Like other Cruise franchises, the climax does overextend itself and a very exaggerated element ultimately tests one's suspension of disbelief, but it's still impressively mounted and provides plenty of thrills.

Part of the larger mantra spoken by several characters in the movie is, "Don't think!" and that's good advice for viewers to follow. If you fondly remember the original and are simply looking for a summer action picture, then the glossy "Top Gun: Maverick" will deliver the goods. But this reviewer wishes the movie had updated more than just the aerial cinematography and delved much deeper into the psyche of naval pilots dealing with desperate and potentially life-ending scenarios.

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