

Will ‘Hocus Pocus 2’ put a spell on you?

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

out of <<<<<<

Running Time: 103 minutes

This original movie will premiere Sept. 30 exclusively on Disney+.

It was 29 years ago that the original Disney chiller “Hocus Pocus” arrived at theaters. Frankly, it didn’t make a big impression initially, underperforming at the box office and drawing the ire of many critics. However, the movie eventually found a devoted following through VHS rentals and numerous television airings.

And it’s easy to see why the film did become popular. The original is a fast-paced, fun and stylish effort that benefits greatly from the comedic chops of its central antagonists. “Hocus Pocus 2” continues the story of a trio of witches who go on the rampage after being resurrected from the dead.

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Set in present-day Salem during Halloween, the story follows teenage outcasts and witchcraft enthusiasts Becca (Whitney Peak) and Izzy (Belissa Escobedo). Disappointed that their friend Cassie (Lilia Buckingham) has joined the popular crowd at school, they decide to celebrate the holiday and Becca's birthday as a twosome.

After visiting the Olde Salem Magic Shoppe for supplies and greeting owner Gilbert (Sam Richardson), the pair decide to try a spell out in the nearby woods and accidentally resurrect the Sanderson sisters. Specifically, the sinister witches Winifred (Bette Midler), Sarah (Sarah Jessica Parker) and Mary (Kathy Najimy).

The trio immediately set out to get revenge on descendants of the reverend who caused their deaths, focusing on Mayor Traske (Tony Hale) and his daughter Cassie. The villains also set out to cast a spell that will grant them immortality and incredible power.

Shooting a follow-up to a beloved film after nearly three decades is no easy feat and this effort takes a great deal of time to find its footing. A lengthy flashback opens the tale, presenting the witches as children. Some of the details presented here are important to the story, but this stiff section doesn't generate many laughs.

There is plenty of set-up and characters to introduce early on which slow down the proceedings. Some of the new arrivals, like the caramel-apple obsessed Mayor Traske and shop owner Gilbert do earn a few chuckles, but quite some time passes before the central returnees appear.

Thankfully, when Winifred, Sarah and Mary are resurrected, the film gets a dose of much needed comedic energy. They arrive singing and dancing (which results in a very funny comment from one teen) and as the story shifts focus to the witches adapting to modern day Salem, there is some entertaining material.

A trip to a local Walgreens delivers big laughs as the villainous Sandersons literally sample beauty products and seek out updated supplies for their conquest of Salem. A trip back to their old abode also hits the mark. The great chemistry between Midler, Parker and Najimy from the first film is immediately present and the gang picks up right where they left off, lighting up the

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screen with quips and slapstick actions at every opportunity.

While the cast deliver laughs, the story itself isn't without problems. Some of the callbacks to the previous film are forced and clumsy (one even involves a clip from the original movie playing on a TV screen).

And a subplot attempting to revise the history of the witches and present them in a more sympathetic light is an unnecessary one. Towards the close, one villain briefly offers advice and encouragement to the young female leads.

One can see the three antagonists sticking up for each other. However, it's a bizarre sentiment from a character known for murdering children in order to extend their own life. Sometimes, a villain doesn't need an extended backstory to soften them and can simply be a menacing and/or darkly amusing force of darkness.

"Hocus Pocus 2" is a mixed bag. It's a passable sequel, but one that ultimately doesn't match its predecessor. The Sanderson sisters are still a lot of fun to watch and there are some rib-tickling moments when they go on the rampage. Yet, there are just as many uncoordinated elements. Maybe I'll feel differently in another 29 years, but in the final analysis this film doesn't quite conjure up the same memorable mojo of the original.

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