

'Renfield' leaves its mark on viewers

Written by gallupsun
Monday, 17 April 2023 14:00

Rating: 3 out of 4

Running Time: 93 minutes

This film from Universal Pictures will open exclusively in theaters on Friday, April 14.

Just because we critics spend most of our lives sitting inside dark rooms and watching somber dramas doesn't mean that we don't enjoy a good laugh once in a while. The central concept of Renfield is an extremely funny one, telling the story of Dracula's assistant and the young man's attempts to end the toxic relationship with his master. The movie is a graphic and over-the-top bloodbath and while the story does get distracted by subplots and not every joke ends up hitting the mark, there are more than enough gags that do land to make for an enjoyably campy and amusing time.

Life is extremely difficult for R. M. Renfield (Nicholas Hoult). After agreeing to serve for eternity as a familiar to Count Dracula (Nicolas Cage), he is given a fraction of the vampire's powers. While the allure may have initially tempted him down this strange path, after centuries he is regretting his choice.

Simply put, Dracula is violent and miserable to be around, especially when wounded and in need of fresh blood. To collect plasma for his weakened master, Renfield arrives in New Orleans and attends a support group for those in abusive relationships, hoping that attendees will point him towards worthy victims. But as he starts listening to their stories, he wonders if he isn't also in need of personal freedom. As he ponders his options, he befriends traffic cop Rebecca Quincey (Awkwafina) and must contend with local criminal leaders Teddy Lobo (Ben Schwartz) and Bellafrancesca Lobo (Shohreh Aghdashloo).

While the idea for this feature may have been written by Robert Kirkman (who created the comic-book series The Walking Dead), this effort is intentionally silly from beginning to end. The

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intent here is not to terrify, but rather present a series of increasingly exaggerated and outrageous events as the lead character attempts to rid himself of the burden of Dracula.

While there are other subplots, the central one is the strongest. In fact, even more time would have been spent developing this thread. Renfield's interactions with support group members work so well that a few battles between the lead and the gang feels superfluous.

But at least all of the cast are excellent and appear to be having a great time. Hoult is an empathetic lead who manages to keep the classic character's less-appealing qualities at bay, while Cage channels Bela Lugosi and milks every scene for maximum impact. Bits in which the less-than-impressed vampire has to listen to Renfield lecture him about his hurtful behavior from a self-help book are nothing short of a blast to watch.

And with Universal Pictures behind this production, the filmmakers have also been allowed to insert their stars into some classic backdrops from the original 1931 Dracula during the introduction, resulting in some big laughs. Additionally, Awkwafina also has plenty of fun moments fighting off mobsters and reacting to her unusual potential love interest.

As mentioned, the level of violence on display is surprisingly high, with limbs and other body parts being regularly ripped off and hurled across rooms at a moment's notice. Many of these effects are computer-generated and don't always look photo-realistic, which in this case the approach actually works as a benefit. The geysers of blood would be disturbing, but as presented maintain the light tone and look phony enough to keep any stomachs from churning.

Admittedly, there is a bit of a slapdash feel to the proceedings, the movie does seem to want to emphasize action in its second half and not every attempt at humor lands. But the central concept of Renfield taking note of his unhealthy relationship and using modern techniques to express himself to Dracula, as well as other gags derived from this concept is a blast to watch.

The cast are charismatic and appear to be enjoying themselves, making it difficult not to have a good time as a viewer. Renfield is flamboyant, silly and ultimately leaves its mark.

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