

'A Haunting in Venice' offers some seasonal fun

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 22 September 2023 02:20



Rating: ««««

out of «««««

Running Time: 103 minutes

This film from 20th Century Studios opens exclusively at cinemas on Friday, Sept. 15.

There certainly is no shortage of murder/mystery features based on the work of Agatha Christie. What is a little unusual is, for all of her 66 detective novels and 14 short story collections, filmmakers and T.V. producers tend to gravitate toward the same stories. *Murder on the Orient Express* was released in 2017 and became a box office hit that led to a follow-up, *Death on the Nile*, only last year. But neither were the first adaptations of each tale.

A Haunting in Venice finally tells a story that is new to the big screen. Truth be told, this sequel doesn't alter the formula dramatically from the previous pictures, but the unfamiliar source material does add a bit of freshness to the proceedings.

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Set after the close of World War II, Hercule Poirot (Kenneth Branagh) has become weary of examining various scenes involving violent death. He decides to retire and live a solitary life in Venice, Italy. Or at least, as quiet an existence as any famous detective can hope for.

Despite his best efforts to keep visitors at bay, old friend and mystery writer Ariadne Oliver (Tina Fey) manages to draw the sleuth out. Oliver tells him she's working on a new project and is attending a Halloween party and séance at the "haunted" palazzo of famous opera singer Rowena Drake (Kelly Reilly). The author insists that she needs Poirot's help to expose medium Mrs. Reynolds (Michelle Yeoh) as a phony. Poirot relents and attends the gathering, but things take a grim turn when an attendee is murdered. With a raging storm and rising canal waters trapping everyone inside the creepy home, Poirot must quickly determine who the killer is.

This feature is far more intrigued by the supernatural than previous entries and employs a claustrophobic and creepy vibe. Visually, it is dimmer, with the majority of the running time in a dark, musty locale. However, that doesn't mean that it isn't wondrous to look at. There are some wonderful shots of Venice filled with mist and fog. Dutch tilts and extreme angles are used liberally to great effect, adding plenty of atmosphere and a bit of extra tension to the proceedings.

As expected, the familiar faces of the cast (which also includes Camille Cottin, Jamie Dornan and Jude Hill) are all as engaging as the frightened attendees. And of course, the lead character Poirot makes an entertaining foil for all the talk of hauntings and ghosts. He frequently delivers his comments about the paranormal with amusingly blunt derision and it's admittedly fun to see the character critique spiritualists while still getting an unexpected shock or two of his own.

One element that may still be overly familiar to viewers is the sleuth's methods and the structure of the middle act of the picture. Once again, Poirot interviews each subject and almost instantly determines that every character has an ulterior motive for having been present at the ceremony. But thankfully, the story contains a few less characters than previous tales, so it doesn't feel bloated.

Another minor problem is that, like other Poirot tales, the resolution is convoluted. The fact that almost every issue raised during the brief discussions with supporting characters is revisited and quickly resolved does come across as outlandish. Regardless, this likely has more to do with the old-fashioned source material than the filmmakers.

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Yes, some of the elements presented are too routine, but the movie is very well-paced and beautifully shot. It also offers a couple of minor surprises and unexpected story elements along the way that manage to keep the murder/mystery investigation from feeling too routine. In the end, using untapped resources does work in its benefit. *A Haunting in Venice* may not provide big shocks, but will deliver a thrill and a chill to those looking for some seasonal fun.

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