Rating: «« out of 4 stars

Running Time: 122 min.

The original *John Wick* came out of the blue back in 2014. It was a really entertaining little action flick that boasted some incredible stunt work and a memorably quirky title character. Essentially, an assassin driven to wipe out all those responsible for an unusual death in his family. It’s tongue was also planted firmly in cheek, adding a welcome dose of humor to offset the violence and carnage. *John Wick: Chapter 2* is still amusing in several respects, although this tale is not quite as effective the second time around.

After the events of the first film, John Wick (Keanu Reeves) heads out to tie up one loose end, leading to the first of many action set pieces. It’s a real doozy involving numerous cars plowing into other vehicles (and people flying out of their seats) like some sort of crazed demolition derby. When the dust finally settles we learn in spite of Wick’s retirement, leaving the assassin community is almost impossible. In fact, he is forced by tradition to provide a favor to an underworld figure named Santino D’Antonio (Riccardo Scamarcio). Naturally, it’s a hit job, but soon after heading to Rome to do his duty the protagonist finds himself being targeted.

I think I really appreciated the simplicity of the original film. This follow-up doesn’t possess any deeper messages nor is it any brighter, but does go out of its way to build a larger world of characters and interactions. And unfortunately, this means that a lot of time is spent setting up the various crime factions, including D’Antonio and his power schemes. Unlike the title character, this story lags quite a bit as it struggles to introduce all of the players. Viewers have to wait some time for an important twist that springs the second half of the movie to life. When a simple action movie clocks at over two hours, one can’t help but feel that early sections could

have done with more pruning.

At least the movie improves dramatically when Wick finds himself on the run and with a price on his head. It seems as though everyone in Manhattan is a killer and out for a big payday, compelling Wick to fend off various characters in increasingly outrageous circumstances. When the movie embraces its absurdity, it really receives a jolt. There’s a clever battle using only a pencil, an amusing bit with two characters quietly taking potshots at each other while walking through a crowd, a knife fight on a subway car and other incredibly elaborate fights between the protagonist and villains. When it gets to the good stuff, it’s a whole lot of fun.

Some of the returning personalities are amusing as well, including Continental hotel manager Charon (Lance Reddick) and its owner, Winston (Ian McShane). Among the new additions, the best include a similarly-themed European establishment operated by Julius (Franco Nero) and a Russian mobster (Peter Stormare) related to the previous film’s villains. Stormare is a lot of fun to watch, chewing scenery like any great villain. When he relays concerns to his men about Wick’s powers and reacts to the violence occurring outside his office, the movie is a hoot. Frankly, it needs even more of him.

With so many characters (several of whom I haven’t even gotten around to mentioning), it becomes very clear that the movie is a set-up of sorts for yet another adventure. This feature leaves numerous threads and characters hanging as the end credits roll. Perhaps everything will be tightly and efficiently wrapped up by the close of the next film. One can only hope. In the meantime, while I can certainly say that *John Wick: Chapter 2* has some great action, viewers should also be warned that they’ll have to take it with plenty of unwanted story fat.

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