

Jonah Hill, Channing Tatum Have Fun on '21 Jump Street'

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – There are various opinions about TV-to-movie remakes, mostly negative. That is why “21 Jump Street,” based on a 1980s TV show, manages some grudging respect. Jonah Hill, Channing Tatum, Ice Cube, Rob Riggle, Nick Offerman and Ellie Kemper create some goofy laughs in this farce.

This is not a serious effort to try and recreate the 1980s vibe of the TV show or even attempt to be serious. It is straight out buffoonery, anchored by Hill and Tatum’s absurd police recruit characters. The film also features some killer supporting players, the creme de la creme of the ironic comedy scene. Although sometimes it veers into action movie mode, and is pretty blithe about the gunplay, Jump Street is a place worth visiting, if only to slip on a banana peel.

Jonah Hill is Schmidt and Channing Tatum is Jenko, newly minted police officers who ran with different crowds back in high school – the nerdy and bookish Schmidt was in contrast to the popular jock Jenko. When they meet again at the police academy they form an unlikely alliance, using what they know best to help each other through the cop training. Their first assignment upon graduation is bike patrol in the park, and they overstep their authority during a botched drug bust.



Channing Tatum (Jenko) and Jonah Hill (Schmidt) Flashback to High School in '21 Jump Street'
Photo credit: Columbia Pictures

This gets them a meeting with the inflexible Deputy Chief Hardy (Nick Offerman), who re-assigns them to a new undercover unit, located at – wait for it – 21 Jump Street. There they meet Captain Dickson (Ice Cube), the angry team leader, who briefs Schmidt and Jenko on the finer points of going back to high school, where their youthful looks will hopefully result in infiltrating a drug ring. In rediscovering their past in the present, they learn more about themselves than just procedural police work.

The description was an attempt to keep a straight face while reciting the standard buddy cop scenario, which mimics what the film was doing throughout. This was a comical satire of the straight police action movie or drama, and any inklings of getting back to plot was met with some laughable non-sequitur. The script was co-written by Jonah Hill and Michael Bacall (“Scott Pilgrim vs. the World”) and every raised eyebrow was tinged with a hint of “we’re just joking.”

Most impressive was the gathering of small and large supporting roles that created even more of a surreal atmosphere. Nick Offerman, who through his absurd character Ron Swanson on TV’s “Parks and Recreation,” is building a comic reputation just by showing up. Ellie Kemper (“Bridesmaids”) is a highlight as the teacher-who-has-a-crush-on-a-student, with her ardor toward Tatum’s Jenko. Rob Riggle as Coach Walters is another funny guy just showing up, and Chris Parnell is perfectly officious (as usual) portraying drama teacher Mr. Gordon. They even nod to the TV series, as Holly Robinson Peete revives her Judy Hoffs role, and solves every crime with virtually no recognition. Did anyone know that James Franco had an acting relative? Brother Dave plays a student criminal.

Jonah Hill and Channing Tatum are contrasting bookends as the cop buddies, cutting up through high school again. The flashbacks to their initial HS experience is pretty funny, Hill having an era-appropriate Eminem look, and Tatum getting to show off some comic chops as both the meathead jock and his later incarnation. The duo seemed much more at home with the comedy than the action sequences, which was expected for Hill, not so much for Tatum.



Hot for Student: Ellie Kemper (Ms. Griggs) and Channing Tatum in '21 Jump Street'
Photo credit: Columbia Pictures

There were some moments when the film was unsure whether this wanted to be a comedy or an action picture, but most of the gunplay and chases were cartoonish. Sometimes the weapons use gets a little much, but that’s probably the zany point, and Jonah Hill gets his chance to dance with the happiness of a warm gun. There are some uneven sequences that indicate some choppy and last minute editing, but it’s a comedy so let’s get to the funny parts.

This was more successful than the similarly rebooted “Starsky and Hutch” of a few years back, only because of the right decision to bring it up to date – no cumbersome 1980s references – and to completely deconstruct the high school premise. Quote whore alert! “These newbie cops write their own ticket to hilarity.”

“21 Jump Street” opens everywhere on March 16th. Featuring Jonah Hill, Channing Tatum, Ice Cube, Rob Riggle, Ellie Kemper, Nick Offerman, Dave Franco and Chris Parnell. Screenplay by Michael Bacall and Jonah Hill. Directed by Phil Lord and Chris Miller. Rated “R”



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