

Sylvester Stallone in Formulaic ‘The Expendables 2’

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Face it, it is fun to see the major action stars of the 1980s, ‘90s and now – Sylvester Stallone, Jason Statham, Jet Li, Chuck Norris, Dolph Lundgren, Bruce Willis and Arnold Schwarzenegger – together again for “The Expendables 2.” Why the hell can’t anyone write a decent story for them?

The film improves on the first movie, not that there was that a long way to go. The action is more relevant and bolder, plus the villainy of Jean-Claude Van Damme is smarmier, but the overall product is the same formulaic crap that plugs into any action film. There is a sense that this joke-filled concept should rise above the usual, and it doesn’t. Additionally Stallone (who co-wrote the screenplay) seems very tired going through the same action poses. It would have been better if the Expendables main mission prevented him from plotting “Rocky 7.”

The elite mercenary force known as the Expendables is shown in the middle of a mission as the story unfolds. They are trying to spring a Chinese billionaire in the middle of armed camp, and the subsequent shootout, hand-to-hand combat and weaponry use would make Sgt. Rock blush. Ross (Sylvester Stallone) is back at commander, Christmas (Jason Statham) sharpens his knives expertise, Ying Yan (Jet Li) uses expert martial arts, Gunner (Dolph Lundgren) is still dangerous, Billy the Kid (Liam Hemsworth) is still young and Hale Caesar (Terry Crews) handles all the weapons. Along the way a so-called “lone wolf” named Booker (Chuck Norris) also helps them out.



Ross (Sylvester Stallone), Christmas (Jason Statham) and Caesar (Terry Crews) in ‘The Expendables 2’
Photo credit: Frank Masi for Lionsgate

In saving the billionaire, they also free Trench (Arnold Schwarzenegger), who now owes Ross a favor, and connects their next mission to Mr. Church (Bruce Willis), a CIA operative who needs to retrieve a secret plutonium stash – and provides the reluctant Expendables with a code expert named Maggie (Nan Yu). The appropriately named Jean Vilain (Jean-Claude Van Damme) is also after the treasure, and kidnaps Billy the Kid to trade for information. This mission just got personal.

It’s good that the film begins with a Chinese-based story, because with his recent plastic surgeries and questionable mustache Sly Stallone looks like Charlie Chan. Sly seems to be going through the motions, spewing his lines in the famous marble mouthed delivery, but with less enthusiasm and energy. The 67 year old actor is determined to convince us that he still can run, shoot and navigate the action film route, but can’t seem to write a part for himself that he can buy into. It’s a stale shoot ‘em up with the usual destroy-the-world/save-the-world mentality, and even the fun of having everyone together can’t make the story rise above banality.

The rest of the mercenary force doesn’t fare much better. Jason Statham, who has done some great action films on his own (like this year’s “Safe”), is reduced to an awkward bromance with Stallone, and they have zero chemistry. The roles should be reversed, Statham should be giving the orders. Another opportunity was lost with Dolph Lundgren in the cast. He and Stallone haven’t fought in either Expendables film – like their face off as Drago versus Balboa in “Rocky IV.” Finally, the femme fatale Maggie is serviceable as portrayed by Nan Yu, except for the potential of a coupling with Charlie Chan...er...Stallone.

The big three – Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis and Jean-Claude Van Damme – all have expanded roles with mixed results. Arnold seems tentative given that he was the Governator, and will take awhile to “be back.” Willis and his famous smirk – the one that has made him an island owner – will never fear the cashing of a paycheck. Van Damme gets to really ham it up as the villain named Vilain and doesn’t disappoint. The final confrontation with Stallone isn’t as good as his barking of orders and chewing of scenery in previous scenes.



Booker (Chuck Norris) is Readyng his Roundhouse Kick in “The Expendables 2”
Photo credit: Alicia Gbur for TriStar Pictures

There are some positives in the film. As mentioned, the sheer nostalgia rush of getting all the action gang together, combined with some very so-bad-they’re-good catchphrases can’t help but be fun. It’s as if all the collectible action figures at Comic Con have come to life. Terry Crews is becoming a nice go-to for the “cynical black guy,” and adds his own touches along the way. And despite line readings that sounded like he was on nitrous oxide, the appearance of Chuck Norris and his beard fist was welcome.

Bruce Willis made a good joke about his participation in the film. With age catching up to “The Expendables,” he quipped, “Hopefully they’ll start shooting the film while we’re young enough to survive.” Yippee kay yay...

“The Expendables 2,” opens everywhere on August 17th. Featuring Sylvester Stallone, Jason Statham, Jet Li, Chuck Norris, Dolph Lundgren, Bruce Willis, Terry Crews, Jean-Claude Van Damme and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Screenplay by Richard Wenk and Sylvester Stallone. Directed by Simon West. Rated “R”



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