

Nicole Kidman is Unique in Fluttery ‘The Paperboy’

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – With all the steamy heat, and the thick, gluey southern accents from mostly non-southern actors, the audience for “The Paperboy” might need to wear lawyer-like suspenders and flap a funeral home fan to take it all in. The sweaty new film features Nicole Kidman, Matthew McConaughey and John Cusack, all chewing the scenery.

Set in the 1970s past – complete with a vague timeline – “The Paperboy” involves a mystery that in the end still may need to be solved, if taking in a coherent narrative is a consideration. The actors are sweating their performance, literally, and there is enough hyperbole and speechifying for several awards-style clips. Director Lee Daniels (“Precious”) does add some touches that harken back to the late 1960s-era “In the Heat of the Night” visual hook – like brightening the daylight scenes – but the loose, bizarre narrative structure and predictability of the story subtracts from this style distinction.

Nicole Kidman is Charlotte Bless, whose early 1970s letter writing campaign for her incarcerated boyfriend, Hillary Van Wetter (John Cusack), lures big-time Miami newspaper reporter and hometown hero Ward Jansen (Matthew McConaughey) back to Lately, Florida. Van Wetter is sitting on death row for a 1969 murder of a big bellied Lately sheriff, and Charlotte hopes Ward can investigate the case and free her lover. Ward will also clash with his family, for his father W.W. Jansen (Scott Glenn) is the publisher of the local paper.



Sultry: Charlotte (Nicole Kidman) in ‘The Paperboy’
Photo credit: Millennium Entertainment

Complicating matters is Ward’s brother, Jack (Zac Efron), a college dropout who volunteers to help the investigation, but instead falls in love with the older Charlotte. Also causing problems is Yardley (David Oyelowo), Ward’s African American reporter assistant, whose presence in this small-town Southern town is less than welcome. Observing the situation and narrating the film from the future is Anita Chester (Macy Gray), the housekeeper of the Jansen clan, and she reveals some secrets involving everyone.

There are too many conflicts in this story, and the focus is extremely fuzzy. The story gets untracked by too many scenes that don’t add up to the whole situation. It’s narrated by the Macy Gray character from an undisclosed time in the future, but her interaction with the characters in the main story from the past doesn’t match her presumed future knowledge of the case. This smacks of many post-production story changes from director Lee Daniels – who also co-wrote the screenplay adaptation with source novelist Peter Dexter – trying to produce some cohesion by tying together all the subplots.

Of all the southerner interpretations, it is Matthew McConaughey that comes off as the most sincere. Maybe it’s because he’s the only true southerner (from Texas). The rest of the characterizations are mealy mouthed executions of whatever peculiar dialect that emerges. Cusack, especially, is trying hard not to be understood. This gives the steamy atmosphere a high school play feel, and lessens the authenticity. African American actor David Oyelowo also overdoes his man-of-mystery role, using author James Baldwin as his role model, if the bust of Baldwin on his character’s desk is any indication.

Nicole Kidman, despite her accent maneuverings, is the most intriguing of all the players. She really goes for it, and imbues Charlotte with a open sensuality that at least affords a couple of really bizarre scenes. When her future film clips are shown, it’s doubtful that her mock sex scene in front of Van Wetter and her new pals will make the cut, although it should. She is a performer who is unafraid of doing what is necessary for character, and in “The Paperboy” she proves it.



Brotherly: Ward (Matthew McConaughey) and Jack (Zac Efron) in ‘The Paperboy’
Photo credit: Millennium Entertainment

Also refreshing at the top of the film, although it peters out or becomes more commonplace by the end, is the feel of an old school southern film drama – think “Deliverance” or the aforementioned “In the Heat of the Night.” Lee Daniels is definitely of the age to be influenced by that style, and he pays tribute to it in the look and feel of “The Paperboy.” It’s the steam heat of southern Florida, and barely suppressed desperation underneath it.

Although it is disappointing to have the story unequal to that atmosphere of desperation, “The Paperboy” is a strangely cast and bizarrely delivered night at the cinema. Given the usual fare, it does score points for just being weird.

“The Paperboy” continues its limited release in Chicago on October 5th. See local listings for show times and theaters. Featuring Matthew McConaughey, Nicole Kidman, Zac Efron, John Cusack, David Oyelowo, Scott Glenn, and Macy Gray, Screenplay adapted by Lee Daniels and Peter Dexter (from his novel). Directed by Lee Daniels. Rated “R”



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