

## Uneven ‘Annie’ Makes Some Very Bad Decisions

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Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The diabetes-inducing Broadway musical “Annie” does not deserve two film versions – including the newest release – especially since both are tortuous and somewhat dark. The “modern” version even eliminates most of the strength that “Annie” possessed on stage, its chipper songs.

Updating the musical from depression era comic strip to hip hoppy modern times was a stretch as well, and luxuriated mostly in the fact that the Daddy Warbucks character – named Will Stacks in this version – lives in excessive wealth and we’re suppose to admire it, dammit. It’s as if the Republican Party had financed the film. Annie is less a plucky orphan (excuse me, foster child) than Cinderella character, contrived to be saved by the wealthy prince, and given obstacles that hacks up even the most sappy elements of the original stage play. When they eliminated one of the best songs from the musical, “NYC,” and replaced it with “The City’s Yours,” the celebration of New York morphs into the ownership of it, which pretty much tells you what priorities this “Annie” inhabits.

Plucky street urchin and foster child Annie (Quvenzhané Wallis) is searching for her real parents, who were last seen at an only-in-fantasy-New-York-City Italian restaurant. She waits there every week, and bores her fellow foster kids with the note that was pinned to her. This also irritates her foster “Mom,” Miss Hannigan (Cameron Diaz), and that is their “Hard Knock Life.”



Riding Into Our Hearts: Quvenzhané Wallis as 'Annie'

*Photo credit: Columbia Pictures*

Meanwhile, Will Stacks (Jamie Foxx) is a billionaire mobile phone mogul running for mayor of New York City. His campaign is in shambles, until by accident he saves Annie from being run over on the streets. His campaign manager Guy (Bobby Cannavale) encourages Stacks to foster Annie, thinking it will boost his mayoral chances. Stack's associate, Grace (Rose Byrne), becomes Annie's caretaker as well, until the paranoid billionaire warms up to her.

All that, and songs galore! The best ones are the signature tunes from the musical, including the aforementioned "Hard Knock Life," "Tomorrow" and "Maybe" (which is still heart breaking), and the new numbers quite frankly are throwaways designed to create soundtrack dollars for the producers. Perhaps the song "Opportunity" will be remembered past the original rendition, but only by its composers and profiteers.

The cast is a mixed bag of performances. Jamie Foxx, Oscar winner, seems clearly embarrassed that he's playing the Warbucks role, and has no chemistry with any of the other cast members. Quvenzhané Wallis, unforgettable in "Beasts of the Southern Wild," is a decent Annie, just because the screen loves her. Cameron Diaz is actually a bit of a surprising spark as Miss Hannigan, updating her from a 1930s hag to a ex-rocker burnout. It's unlikely that such a person would be caring for children, but she made it fun.

Bobby Cannavale adds the darker tone to the proceedings, as a win-at-all-costs political advisor. That's exactly what the world was waiting for in a modern of "Annie." Rose Byrne is a game Grace, and actually has some charm in her big number ("I Think I'm Gonna Like it Here"). Unfortunately the song celebrates the excess of the 1% America, which I don't think was the intention of the original comic strip, a social satire that criticized the rich. Oh well.





Will Stacks (Jamie Foxx) Falls for the Title Character in ‘Annie’  
Photo credit: Columbia Pictures

It wasn’t all bad, it just made bad choices. Some of the numbers were well staged, in the tradition movie musical way. There were some snarky meta lines, implying that the musical numbers were separate from real life, including a killer final piece of dialogue. This version chose modernizing the story rather than paying attention to it, and that’s what squelched any potential. I don’t think the kid audience will care about political maneuvering, nor will understand it, and it grinds the gears of any charm left to a dull finish.

However, the sun will come out tomorrow. Instead of paying the high fees of watching this modern dreck, seek out the 1999 TV movie version of “Annie,” directed by the musical theater impresario Rob Marshall. The marvelous song “NYC” is given full Broadway treatment, and the depression-era setting is intact. You won’t need anything but that one.

*“Annie” opens everywhere on December 19th. Featuring Quvenzhané Wallis, Jamie Foxx, Cameron Diaz, Bobby Cannavale and Rose Byrne. Screenplay adapted by Will Gluck and Aline Brosh McKenna. Directed by Will Gluck. Rated “PG”*



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