Tartan Prancer – Yes, a Fictional Albanian Car – Steals the Otherwise Borrowed Show in ‘Vacation’

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- Adam Fendelman [2]
- Beverly D'Angelo [3]
- Charlie Day [4]
- Chevy Chase [5]
- Chris Hemsworth [6]
- Christina Applegate [7]
- Ed Helms [8]
- HollywoodChicago.com Content [9]
- John Francis Daley [10]
- Jonathan M. Goldstein [11]
- Kaitlin Olson [12]
- Keegan-Michael Key [13]
- Leslie Mann [14]
- Michael Pena [15]
- Movie Review [16]
- National Lampoon's Vacation [17]
- Nick Kroll [18]
- Norman Reedus [19]
- Regina Hall [20]
- Ron Livingston [21]
- Skyler Gisondo [22]
- Steele Stebbins [23]
- Tim Heidecker [24]
- Vacation [25]



Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Retreads from classics are often as weary as having to write that they are almost never as good as the original. And here we go again with the Ed Helms-led “Vacation,” which fails to capitalize on the beloved Chevy Chase film “National Lampoon’s Vacation” from 1983.

Lacking the soul and whimsy of the original, this modern-day take on the Harold Ramis and John Hughes classic attempts to recreate the charm with actors who know how to read the lines but don’t embody the characters. And they’re forced to speak within a lazily written story that doesn’t add enough to justify coming back.



Ed Helms as Rusty Griswold with the Tartan Prancer in “Vacation”.
Image credit: Hopper Stone, Warner Bros.

The decision by Ed Helms to take his family to Walley World – just like his father (Chevy Chase) did with his family – feels forced for the film to have a reason for being. It feels like it went down like this: “Hey, there was a cool film from 1983. Let’s do the same thing, but since Chevy Chase is older, he’ll be the grandpa now and we’ll just have his son trace the same steps.”

The film lacks originality, is uninspired and fails to summon the allure of its source material. Instead, laughs pretty much only come from two other places: a fictional car and a foul-mouthed kid. Kudos for those two, but that’s not enough to justify trying to make new money on an already done-perfectly plot from 1983.

Instead of taking his family to the same cabin they’re all bored with, Ed Helms as Rusty Griswold – a fitting name describing his comedy here – decides to spice things up. He wants to drive across the country and return to Walley World just as his father, Clark, did with his family decades earlier. The journey there, of course, goes awry and the film focuses on the goofs to try to make you laugh.



Left to right: Christina Applegate as Debbie Griswold, Skyler Gisondo as James Griswold, Ed Helms as Rusty Griswold, Steele Stebbins as Kevin Griswold, Chevy Chase as Clark Griswold and Beverly D’Angelo as Ellen Griswold in “Vacation”.
Image credit: Hopper Stone, Warner Bros.

Things start very promising with an act of genius comedy: the fictional creation of an Albanian car called the Tartan Prancer. The car literally does everything you wouldn’t want an automobile to do. It has a huge key fob with mysteriously random buttons. While driving, the driver’s seat turns to the rear (that’s dangerous).

By pressing another button, the windows blow out or the bumper falls off. Press the muffin button and the car explodes. It’s got two gas tanks, but both drain way too quickly. And as backup, it has an electric plug that plugs into nothing because no outlet accepts a corkscrew input.

You can change languages for GPS navigation, which is helpful, but you can’t change it back once you get to the angry Asian who yells directions at you. Quite possibly the worst car in the world, here’s a hilarious faux ad/viral video for it.

The Prancer, though, ends up being the comedic star of the show, which is a problem. The film often feels like actors just reacting to it and that only goes so far. Beyond the Prancer, as the ad above even astutely jokes, the only other memorable star is the 4’2” “boy actor” Steele Stebbins. Playing the kid Kevin Griswold, he’s got an “R”-rated mouth, is largely the reason the film got an “R” rating and he loves to bully his older softie brother, James Griswold (played by Skyler Gisondo).

But the dysfunctional relationship between these two brothers is much funnier and more memorable than their “A”-list parents and the stars of the film: Ed Helms and Christina Applegate as the mom, Debbie Griswold. When films have supporting actors and fictional cars that outshine the primary stars and the story as a whole, what you’ve got left is a piecemeal movie with some obligatory nostalgia that works only in bits and pieces but doesn’t cohesively tell a successful story.

The film even veers off to unnecessary places with Chris Hemsworth and his exaggeratedly large manhood. The great-looking “Thor” star is used to flirt with the now-conservative Griswold mom and reveal to her husband that, in her sorority days, she used to be “Debbie Do Anything”.

While “Vacation” features an all-star cast of comedic actors in small roles, the film makes weak use of them. Leslie Mann is barely used and Chevy Chase is a shell of his former self. The “Four Corners” cops Tim Heidecker, Nick Kroll, Kaitlin Olson and Michael Peña have great comedic setup, but with little payoff.

Norman Reedus ends up being a bit cute without really any lines and Keegan-Michael Key is comic genius in “Key and Peele” but isn’t used much here. Charlie Day really is the only comedic supporting actor (aside from Steele Stebbins) who makes me laugh. Paid to take the Griswolds on a river float, his mind is distracted and grieving from just being dumped by his fiancé. The slow-motion scene works, but scenes like it are few and far between.

“Vacation” stars Ed Helms, Christina Applegate, Steele Stebbins, Skyler Gisondo, Chris Hemsworth, Leslie Mann, Chevy Chase, Beverly D’Angelo, Charlie Day, Ron Livingston, Norman Reedus, Keegan-Michael Key, Regina Hall, Tim Heidecker, Nick Kroll, Kaitlin Olson and Michael Peña from writers and directors John Francis Daley and Jonathan M. Goldstein. The film, which has a running time of 99 minutes and

opens on July 29, 2015, is rated "R" for crude and sexual content and language throughout and brief graphic nudity.


[26]

By ADAM FENDELMAN [27]
Publisher
HollywoodChicago.com
adam@hollywoodchicago.com [26]

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