Nostalgia Not Enough to Save 'Baywatch' From Drowning

Submitted by JonHC [1] on May 25, 2017 - 11:24pm

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Rating: **1.5**/5.0

CHICAGO – Going to the beach is simultaneously an exciting and disgusting experience. Swimming in the cool water that thousands have gone inside in the past, with more than a few leaving bodily fluid deposits, is the perfect way to describe "Baywatch". No amount of beefy biceps or shirt-busting breasts could have given "Baywatch" the buoyancy needed to keep from sinking, let alone stay afloat.

Director Seth Gordon is able to take his immense TV show experience and successfully recreate the visual aesthetic of the "Baywatch" show and give it a modern face-lift. That isn't the only work the show has had done, but like cheap, botched plastic surgery, the work was definitely not for the better. It goes without saying that the film's warm color palette fits with the beach perfectly, but everything else is as murky as the waters of the Pacific Ocean. The film's pacing is nothing like the tv show's, opting instead to raise the testosterone up to 11 and make it feel more like a mindless action flick. Don't worry, there is still all the slow-motion running and half-zipped female bathing suits galore, but when you have characters constantly questioning the events, like Zac Efron's character delivering the same realization every few scenes, this dead horse gets beaten into a bloody paste.

Different crew, but the same watch in 'Baywatch'
Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

You can be self-aware without playing to the obvious, but that is just one of the long list of things "Baywatch" proves it doesn't understand. With a Baywatch-sized team of story and screenplay writers, the script should have been something gnarly, but instead came off as terribly fishy. Screenwriting duo Damian Shannon and Mark Swift have given us such gems as the "Friday the 13th" remake and "Freddy vs. Jason" and have teamed up once again to deliver their latest installment of a horror film taking place near a body of water with two behemoths sparring. The only difference is that while their previous films tastefully capped their penis jokes at 1- 2, "Baywatch aggressively inserts almost a dozen, leaving us with a very salty taste in our mouths…. from the sea water, of course.

This is the kind of humor that teenage boys, with their overcompensating bravado, will enjoy because it caters to them and to the male gaze as a whole. Again, I understand the sex appeal was a big part of the television show, but instead of just making fun of it, they reinforce this form of sexual objectification in today's society. The most enjoyable part of the "Baywatch" tv show was its charming naiveté. It was an outrageous show that put lifeguards in impossible situations and to an unattainable standard. It took itself deathly serious and that is what both made us laugh at it while becoming absorbed into the latest catastrophe to strike the beach. "Baywatch" takes the innocence of the show and perverts it to an almost 2-hour long dick joke filled with enough stereotypes, fat-shaming, and female objectification to make you long for the good old days. At least when the television show casually did some of those things, it came off as a misguided reflection of the time period. When the film does these same things, it just comes off as a malicious way to say offensive things in the guise of "jokes".

Dwayne Johnson and Zac Efron lead this beach party in 'Baywatch'
Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

The best remakes, in either film or television, take the heart and spirit of the original source material and modernize it by reimagining a concept set to a contemporary landscape. That includes getting rid of some of the questionable content of the original based on race, sex, sexual orientation, etc. "Baywatch" chucks out the heart of the tv show in order to make room for bigger biceps, and instead gives us the absolute worst from not only the television show but from the 90's as a whole. Also part of ruining the 90's, the film takes the inevitable cameos we all knew were coming and announces them in the opening credits of the film. That turned out to be the first warning of what would be a choppy ride.

The film isn't all bad, only mostly. Aside from the few solid jokes sprinkled throughout, the buddy dynamic of some of the characters was the most enjoyable part of the film. Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson and Zac Efron have an effortless chemistry that compliments the team-related aspects of the film but little else. With the spotlight (and presumably most of the film's casting budget) being placed on the two of them, there is little time for any other character to get developed. That forces most of the women into the role of eye-candy whose only real purpose is to support the male characters, sacrificing their own chance at becoming realized characters. If that wasn't bad enough, the film also isn't too fond of minorities, making the only officer, Sgt. Ellerbee (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II) completely incompetent to the point that untrained lifeguards are forced to solve crimes. Unfortunately, he gets off lucky because it seems like mostly all the characters of color are the only ones that get killed. This inattention to both females and characters of color strike doubly hard at the fantastic Priyanka Chopra, who gives a great performance in her underdeveloped role as a stock-Bond villain.

"Baywatch" opens everywhere on May 25th. Featuring Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Zac Efron, Priyanka Chopra, Alexandra Daddario, Kelly Rohrbach, Ilfenesh Hadera, Jon Bass, Yahya Abdul-Mateen II and Hannibal Buress. Screenplay by Damian Shannon and Mark Swift. Directed by Seth Gordon. Rated "R"

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