

‘The Kitchen’ is Once Upon a Time in New York City

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – It’s the ladies turn to harken back to the badass 1970s, more precisely 1977 in Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood of New York City. In an adaptation of a DC Vertigo comic series, “The Kitchen” features Melissa McCarthy, Tiffany Haddish and Elisabeth Moss finding their destiny in taking over mobster duties.

That part of the story is the most unlikely, but it makes for a nice parallel feminist fantasy alongside the women’s movement of the era (as adapted and directed by Andrea Berloff). It’s the performances that make this gritty film accessible, especially Elisabeth Moss (“The Handmaiden’s Tale”) from the lead trio, who embodies and embraces every character she takes on. The supporting roles, mostly male, is highlighted by character actor fave Bill Camp, alongside Domhnall Gleason, James Badge Dale and Common (looking like the Common of now rather than trying a 1970s look). It’s the cast that makes this tale of larceny and New-York-in-the-1970s mobsters entertaining, although the R-rated gunplay and body dismemberment is not for the faint of heart.

The Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood in 1977 New York City lives up to its hellhole reputation, as the Irish mafia keeps a firm grip on neighborhood graft. Three of the lower level men decide to start robbing liquor stores, and they are busted through a federal sting led by Gary Silvers (Common). They are sent to prison for three years, leaving their wives Kathy (Melissa McCarthy), Ruby (Tiffany Haddish) and Claire (Elisabeth Moss) to fend for themselves.



Elisabeth Moss, Tiffany Haddish and Melissa McCarthy in ‘The Kitchen’

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

The ladies get together and figure out that they can take over their husband’s protection racket (getting payouts from businesses to prevent damage or crime), and through some guile and luck start to score big time. When they start expanding their operations, Brooklyn’s Alfonso Coretti (Bill Camp) is none too pleased, and the heat gets worse when their husbands are released early.

This is one of those stories where everything happens in perfect timing and in the right places. The evolution in these women – the story takes place over two years – happens less to McCarthy’s Kathy, more to Haddish’s Ruby and most effectively for Moss’s Claire. The transition from timid to tough is always difficult to maneuver, here it just occurs to fit a perfect-in-place storyline, no doubt delving into its comic book source by having epic anti-heroism in the women, and twirling mustaches on the villains. Only Bill Camp and Elisabeth Moss escape stereotyping.

The story problems stem mostly from everything happening so quickly. Much as I would want the women to succeed (even down to director Berloff), I don’t think it would have went down without more push back from the men, who are pretty much ruthless mobsters in a man’s world of the era. The atmosphere was nicely authentic and gritty, and the story followed that path, but we’re suppose to believe that the ladies’ charm and better management kept the Benjamins rolling in. If it were only that easy. Even in its comic book sensibility the film needed a bit more nuance.



Common is Federal Agent Silvers in 'The Kitchen'

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

However, the performances do make up for it, so the material at least gave the cast something to chew on, with Elisabeth Moss miraculously creating a character literally out of thin air. She begins as the mousey-est wife, a victim of domestic abuse, and ends up being a sensual, violent and most-fascinated-with-being-a-criminal rock star. There is a scene where she literally baptizes herself into a new life. McCarthy is a sort of an anchor, and doesn't get to flex her performance as significantly, and as mentioned before Tiffany Haddish changed too radically, but still managed to check in with a decent play on her wife.

Kudos to the film on creating an excellent tonal atmosphere for the bad old days of "Ford to City: Drop Dead" New York grit, much like Quentin Tarantino recently did for 1969 Los Angeles in his "Once Upon a Time..." "The America story is like a fairy tale in any era of its history, yet it still searches for that happily ever after.

"The Kitchen" opens everywhere on August 9th. Featuring Melissa McCarthy, Tiffany Haddish, Elisabeth Moss, Bill Camp, Domhnall Gleeson, James Badge Dale, Common and Margo Martindale. Screenplay adapted and directed by Andrea Berloff. Rated "R"



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