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Get Lost, Mary Poppins!

Practically Imperfect in Every Way

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Michael Giltz

Mary Poppins Returns purports to tell an all-new adventure of the practically perfect nanny. It doesn't. Making matters worse, the film is cast almost entirely with people who can't sing or dance. And no, Lin-Manuel Miranda does not form the exception to that rule.

Directed by Rob Marshall, the story features the same Banks children but now they're all grown up. Michael (Ben Whishaw) is a widower with three young kids of his own. Broken by the death of his wife, the sweet, ineffectual Michael even snaps at the children once or twice!

Mary Poppins pops in to set things right and she's played by the very good actress Emily Blunt. Along for the ride in the role of lamplighter Jack is Miranda, Disney's idea of street cred for a family-friendly musical.

Every plot point, every scene, every song lines up with fanatical precision to the 1964 classic. Jane's mother championed the suffragette movement, so Jane campaigns for the rights of workers. Dick Van Dyke, as a friend of the original Mary Poppins, sported a dreadful Cockney accent. This film casts another American in essentially the same role, with Miranda contractually obliged to deliver another bad accent.

MARY POPPINS RETURNS (2/5 stars)

Directed by: Rob Marshall

Written by: David Magee

Starring: Emily Blunt, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Ben Whishaw, Emily Mortimer, Meryl Streep, Angela Lansbury, Colin Firth

Running time: 130 min.

It gets worse. Originally, Poppins made doing chores fun, so in the sequel she makes taking a bath quite the treat. Jumping into a chalk drawing and interacting with animated characters turns into jumping onto a painted bowl...and interacting with animated characters.

In the original, they visit Mary's Uncle Albert, who laughs so much he floats up to the ceiling. They soon float up to join him. In the sequel, they visit Mary's cousin (Meryl Streep) and her entire home turns topsy turvy! Again they end up on the ceiling.

In both films, the kids create a ruckus at the bank where their father works, get lost on the way home and are led to safety by Mary's friend. hilariously, in both films this action is interrupted by a massive song-and-dance number featuring Bert/Jack and his pals that goes on way, way too long. This sequel reproduces even the modest flaws from the original.

Finally, at the end of the first movie, the father and his children go fly a kite. In the sequel? They fly a balloon.



Mary Poppins likes her jazz hot

Beyond the painfully-identical trappings, this film gets the spirit all wrong. This Mary Poppins is arch! Coy! In

a misguided tribute to music hall and Rob Marshall's movie Chicago, Mary Poppins even dons a Lulu wig and does a number in full-on Bob Fosse mode, with Miranda sort-of rapping because why not? It gives the decided impression this nanny wouldn't mind a good shag.

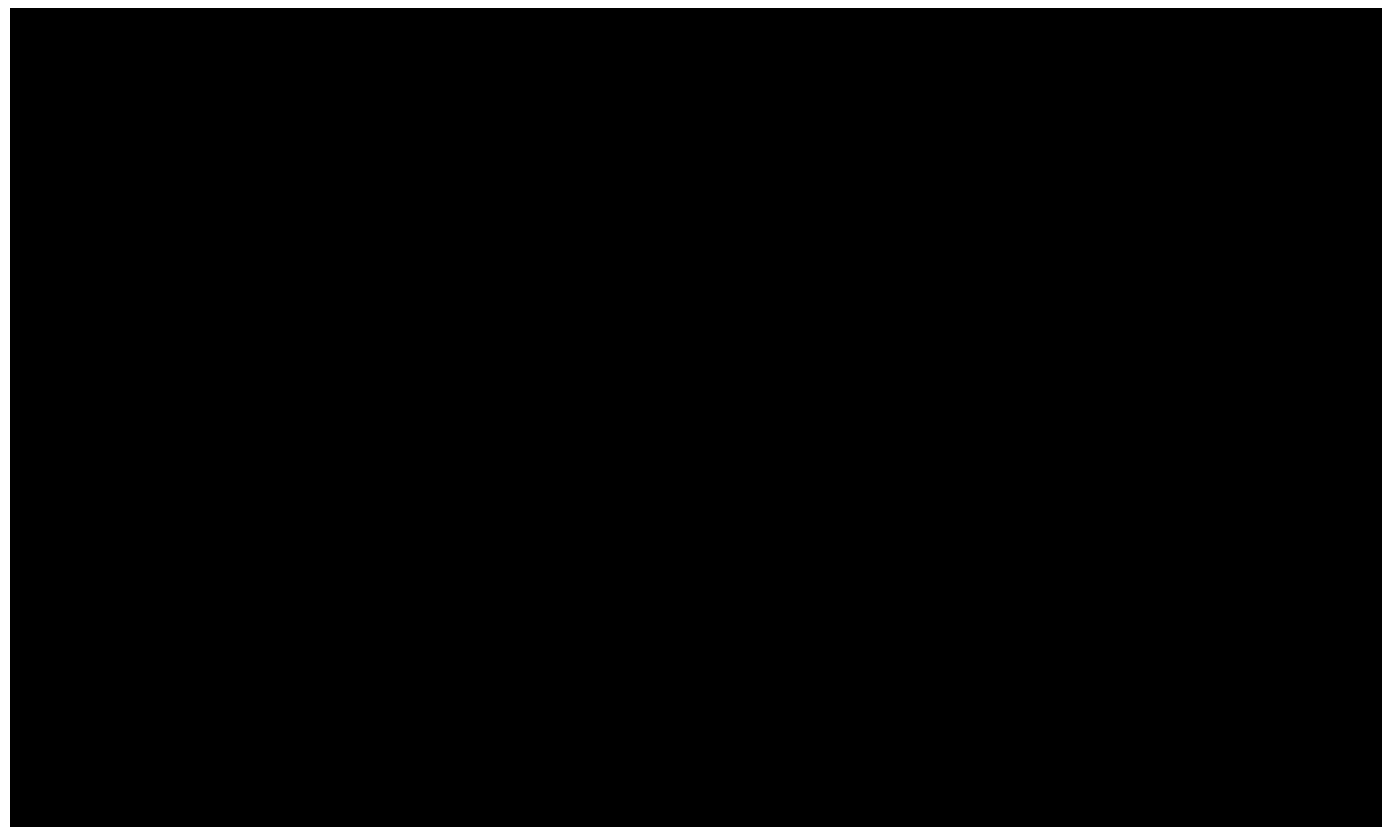
In the original, Mr. Banks loses his temper but Mary Poppins cannily manipulates him into doing precisely what she wants. In the sequel, Michael Banks gives Mary Poppins a dressing down...and she meekly submits. As Mary Poppins would never say, WTF?

The songs aren't awful but they're no match for the peerless tunes by the Sherman Brothers. Here, the first two are the best. The scene-setter "(Underneath The) Lovely London Sky" proves Miranda is a much better rapper than singer. Still, it's decently evocative.

That's followed by "A Conversation," Michael's mournful number about missing his wife. For a brief moment, I imagined this film just might be distinctive and fresh. Then the Xeroxing began, the whole, dreadful, déjà vu of it all.

It's as if someone laid out the 1964 film on a table and placed tracing paper over it. Then a small child sketched in the outline of every scene and every song before filling them in as best he could, tongue presumably sticking out of his mouth in fretful concentration.

In this case that child is director Rob Marshall. It's a bad film, but it's also his best. He keeps the camera at a respectful distance, shoots dance sequences in full frame and avoids the manic editing of most modern musicals, including his own. Mary Poppins Returns is a slog, but bless him for trying.



Tags: Ben Whishaw, Dick Van Dyke, Emily Blunt, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Mary Poppins, Mary Poppins Returns, Meryl Streep, Rob Marshall

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Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for many outlets, such as New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He's co-host of the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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