Conan the Barbarian

R

113 Minutes

Rating: ****

Director Marcus Nispel, perhaps best known for previously directing the 2009 remake of Friday the 13th, gets another chance at making over a popular 80s icon with the new version of Conan the Barbarian. For all that it follows the basic plotline of the 1982 adventure classic, Nispel's film is no paint-by-numbers hack job. Nispel tries hard to do something fresh and new with the iconic hero, Conan of Cimmeria, and to his credit succeeds more often than not.

Nispel creates a world that is indeed fit for high adventure. The cinematography is mind-blowing, populated by vast, ominous forests and threatening cityscapes that harbor dangers best left undiscovered by all that the mightiest of warriors. But Conan is a Cimmerian, and as the film’s villain correctly surmises at one point he fears neither pain nor death. Jason Momoa fills Conan's shoes admirably, and if his accent is all wrong for the part he certainly looks spot-on like creator Robert Howard’s original description of the character. Momoa seems to have a lot of fun being Conan, and he brings a dynamic energy and power to the role that it would fail without.

Stephen Lang is also terrific as Conan’s nemesis, a ruthless warrior called Khalar Zym. Rivaling Conan’s own mastery of the sword, Zym is obsessed with two things: unearthing the remains of a long-forgotten mystical talisman that can bestow magical powers upon its wielder, and restoring his beloved wife to life…and since his wife was a nefarious sorceress, nothing good could possibly come from that, either. Ron Perlman, one of Hollywood’s best character actors, does a fine turn early on as Conan’s father, while the lovely Rachel Nichols is excellent in the part of Tamara, a young woman who gradually finds herself falling in love with Conan despite her initial misgivings about him. But the movie’s most exceptional performance belongs to Rose McGowan, who steals every scene she’s in as Zym’s daughter, Marique. A witch like her mother, Marique is one bizarre character, and McGowan has a ball chewing up the scenery as the plainly mad sorceress whenever she has a chance.

Is this movie as good as the 1982 version? Well no, it’s not, but that’s not necessarily a fair standard. The original Conan the Barbarian is a bona fide action classic, and one of Arnold Schwarzenegger’s best films. The Nispel/Momoa film may not quite be that good, but thanks to outstanding performances, great special effects, and superb, nearly non-stop brutal and bloody action, it’s still solid entertainment…and easily recommended to all sword-and-sorcery fans.