Scream 4
R
111 Minutes
Rating: ****

For the record, I have never considered Ghostface, the trademark villain of the Scream franchise, to be in the same league as some other heavy-hitters of the slasher genre, like Michael Myers or Jason Voorhees. Ghostface has always lacked the truly terrifying presence to qualify as an elite horror-movie assassin, and moreover his victims aren’t usually done in by any killer moves on Ghostface’s part as by their own ineptitude. The tone set by the original Scream doesn’t help either—the films are as much comedy as horror, and that has a tendency to break the atmosphere at exactly the wrong moment.

Scream 4 doesn’t do away with the aforementioned weaknesses, but it does at least minimize them. The rationale behind the Ghostface killings in the new film is quite clever, and the climax turns everything we thought we knew about the story on its head. The script still goes for the funnybone as often as it does the jugular, but at least the timing is better this time around, with a few genuinely unforeseeable shocks that manage to be, yes, funny and scary. The humor is still a bit irritating in spots, but never reaches the point where the viewer forgets he’s watching a thriller. Horror legend Wes Craven is back as the director, and rarely pulls his punches. Ghostface conveys more menace, and when he stabs somebody there’s a rare viciousness in his bladework.

Of course, the Scream-team is back in full force. Neve Campbell reprises her role as Ghostface’s eternal prey, Sidney Prescott, and creates a more likeable version of the character who is trying to finally put the horror of her life to rest. Courteney Cox and David Arquette are back as Gale and Dewey, and the two step into their familiar roles with admirable ease. Several new faces make their Scream debut as well, including Marielle Jaffe, Hayden Panettiere, and Emma Roberts as Sidney’s cousin, Jill, who is #1 on Ghostface’s new hitlist. The cast does a good job of alternating between the comedy and horror along with the script, and everyone seems to be enjoying their part.

It’s still no Halloween and Ghostface is still not The Shape, but Scream 4 is a surprisingly good movie that in many ways surpasses the original. There’s some fairly acute social commentary to go along with the laughs and mayhem, and overall Scream 4 is worthwhile viewing for fans of the genre.