Movie Review: 'Race to Witch Mountain' a supercharged remake

by Jane Clifford

Tia and Tony have been replaced by Sarah and Seth as the two endearing alien children in "Race to Witch Mountain," but this remake of Disney's 1975 "Escape to Witch Mountain" is bound to become as popular as the classic family film.

RATINGS GUIDE:

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Director Andy Fickman stayed close to the heart of the original plot â€” two kids desperately trying to return to their home planet. But Matt Lopez provides an updated screenplay, based on the book "Escape to Witch Mountain" by Alexander Key, that's bound to entertain today's young audiences. And their grandparents and parents, yesterday's "Witch Mountain" fans, will find plenty of warm reminders of the original story and its sequel, "Return From Witch Mountain," both of which conveniently have been re-released on DVD recently.

This time around, the kids appear in Jack Bruno's (Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson) cab, outside Las Vegas. Sarah (AnnaSophia Robb) and Seth (Alexander Ludwig) need to find their spaceship, which has been seized by a special UFO unit of the government headed by the semi-evil Henry Burke (Ciaran Hinds). Meanwhile, a new villain, the Darth-Vaderesque Siphon, is on a mission to destroy the kids, due to a civil war of sorts.

So, Jack has his work cut out for him. As lovable and irascible a character as was Eddie Albert in the original,

Jack can't help but bond with the kids and do his best to get them home. Another new character this time around is Dr. Alex Friedman (Carla Gugino), an astrophysicist written off by her colleagues because of her unflagging belief in life on other planets.

Those who remember the simple story and elementary special effects of the originals will be unprepared for this version. It's incredibly action-packed, with terrific stunts, heart-stopping chases and first-class effects, thanks to director of photography Greg Gardiner, production designer David J. Bomba, editor David Rennie and stunt coordinator Scott Rogers.

The tension of car chases that will more than once have you pushing back in your seat or grabbing the armrests is broken up with humor provided by Cheech Marin and the goofy Garry Marshall, playing a "They're out to get us" UFO expert. All the performances here are solid and the music ideally sets the mood of each scene.

Look closely and you will see Tia and Tony, all grown up, once the action moves to Stony Creek (yes, the same sleepy town where strange things go on). Kim Richards (Tia) plays Tina, a helpful waitress at Ray's Tavern, and Iake Eissinmann (Tony) is easily recognizable as the town's Sheriff Antony. (Note: Iake Eissinmann acted under the name Ike Eisenmann, among other monikers.)

There's no Ray Milland or Christopher Lee or Bette Davis meanies in this updated feature, but you worry just as much this time about whether the children will make it. Nor is there as much evidence of the kids' powers of telepathy and ability to alter matter, so central to the originals. Though those skills appear just when they're needed the most.

"Race to Witch Mountain." Rated: PG. Running time: 1 hour, 39 minutes. 3 stars.

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