Movie Review: 'Stardust'

by David_Elliott

There may not be a more beautiful sound in popular music than Nat King Cole singing Hoagy Carmichael's "Stardust." Which is the sort of sure, deft magic absent from "Stardust," a fantasy lacking liftoff.

'STARDUST' - Michele Pfieffer is featured in the summer magical adventure 'Stardust.' CNS Photo courtesy of David James. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Ol' Hoagy is long gone, and what we get is more like a cheese-steak hoagy reworked for a British pub's Fairie Tale Happie Hour. Make that two long hours, as Matthew Vaughn's lavish blowout (from a novel by comic book writer Neil Gaiman) winds and loops through an energetic but draining plot.

Cute, bland Charlie Cox is the hero, Tristan, offspring of a bold hunk who got through the not very imposing wall around a mythic plot of England, out where the town of Wall leads to mysterious Stormhold. After ripe narration by Ian McKellen, Peter O'Toole as the supine king dies after gleefully relishing his sons turning

upon one another.

Stormhold is prey to forces beyond this mortal world. Richard III-ish prince Rupert Everett wants the jewel that will assure his rise to the crown. Three crone witches conspire to recover their youth by using a fallen star that became, in its crater, the lovely Yvaine (Claire Danes).

The witches are not from "Macbeth," but at least a third are from "The Witches of Eastwick." Cher and Susan Sarandon couldn't make it, but here is Michelle Pfeiffer, that glowing former Eastwitch, now camping as nasty Larnia, eager to smite, snarl, snark and snicker.

Pfeiffer sure is a trouper, but a sado touch creeps in, as some shots pose her unflatteringly even when she isn't trapped in crone cosmetics. Her fretful decline alternates with luminous shots of Danes, who often gets added radiance from stellar backlighting.

Ye olde elements doth duly appear: curses, reading of entrails, casting of runic stones, animal morphings, a pirate ship that flies. The last bit features Robert De Niro as Capt. Shakespeare, not trying for an English accent but doing show-laff routines. The growly skipper enjoys a merry drag life in his wardrobe closet. How De Niro tries, but he needs a Fokker on hand to boost the fun.

Watching De Niro out-nance Johnny Depp's Capt. Sparrow is what seems to pass as robust humor in theme-park movies like this. The epics are incestuous cousins at a budget fat farm, with a jaunty slab of "Pirates" bouncing off "Lord of the Rings" to pass through "The Neverending Story" by way of whatever Terry Gilliam head party comes to mind.

There is nothing here like the absolutely sustained detailing and adroit narrative pressure of the Harry Potter visions. By comparison, the makers of this big show seem lost in a rummage bin, busy spending more than creating.

"Stardust" staggers with end-of-summer excess, seldom winning (except from the quite young) more than a weary gasp. No doubt the British are worried about maintaining a movie income flow once the Potter saga ends, but if this thing is setting up a sequel, they need to begin again.

A Paramount Pictures release. Director: Matthew Vaughn. Writers: Jane Goldman, Neil Gaiman. Cast: Michelle Pfeiffer, Claire Danes, Robert De Niro, Sienna Miller, Charlie Cox, Rupert Everett, Peter O'Toole. Running time: 2 hours. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

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