

Quiet Up & Listen Down

... Nope, scratch that. Reverse it.

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Willy Wonka is back – and not the one the world is used to. Warner Bros. has reworked the whimsical character of Willy Wonka in their newest adaptation of the *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* franchise titled “Wonka,” displaying a younger, more charming, and significantly less off-putting version of the prior screen incarnations.

The prequel, released mid December of 2023, was inspired by Roald Dahl’s original *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* book trilogy, however it was not beholden to them. There were more personal elements to the film’s plot from director Paul King, making the two-hour-long film contribute a more emotional take on the backstory of Wonka’s character.

The movie follows the character Willy Wonka (Timothée Chalamet), who arrives upon a European shore with nothing but “12 silver sovereigns and a hatful of dreams,” and a determination to be a successful candy-maker. Wonka’s breezy attitude starkly contrasts the characters around him, such as the conniving Mrs. Scrubitt (Olivia Colman) and her henchman Bleacher (Tom Davis). The film soon transitions into quite the otherworldly fantasy as Wonka sings, dances, and magically conjures candies that possess strange powers – such as the ability to fly.

The musical comedy’s clear purpose was to make audiences shed a sentimental tear or two, but the film is mainly content to provide amusement and a new perspective on Willy Wonka’s widely-known persona. The performances, costumes, songs, and choreography in the film are both visually and sonically appealing, which was surprising considering many of the cast members – namely Chalamet himself – are not particularly known for their singing or dancing abilities.

King, co-writer Simon Farnaby, and their collaborators perfected the film’s lively tone and precise pacing from the very beginning and never lost control of it. Although there are satirical and metaphorical touches that can be easily picked up on, they are presented with a throwaway sensibility.

Brimming with colorful characters adorned with tongue-twisting names, the DNA of Dahl is evident in the film, even during sentimental flashbacks of deceased relatives or morosely destitute yearnings reminiscent of Charlie Bucket himself. It is inconsistently unconventional and silly, though it leans heavily into its dream-like additives, the best, or perhaps most egregious, example is Hugh Grant as an Oompa-Loompa. With so much fantasy, it is difficult to take the predicaments with anything but a grain of salt, especially with a “Mission: Impossible”-esque subplot that includes an underground meeting of conspiratorial price-fixers and bribed judicial muscle, an army of “chocoholic” monks, and a basement-dwelling ninja sentry (culminating in a James Bond-like showdown), which must be defeated in a high-stakes infiltration.

As for the musical components, composed by Neil

Hannon and Joby Talbot, the songs are uniquely cultivated for “Wonka” (save for the two borrowed from the 1971 showing of “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory”). They are generally peppy, fast-paced, and aurally pleasing, often using nonsensical words to create quirky rhymes. Toward the finale, the singing is brought to a halt for some time, perhaps because more jovial tunes would take away from the suspenseful tone of the film’s turning point. However, it concludes splendidly, with a suitably joyous outcome and a nostalgic piece, “Pure Imagination,” which was originally written for the 1971 film.

Many critiques on the movie are drawn from Wonka’s character, whether it be that Chalamet was not fit to play the role, or that the film did not accurately capture Wonka’s personality from Dahl’s original vision. Though it is not uncommon for prequels or remakes such as this to stray from the development of its earliest making, it is understandable for fans of Dahl to be upset at the new, slightly watered-down Wonka.

This being said, there are elements of the newest Wonka’s personality that resonate with past versions, namely 1971’s Wonka played by Gene Wilder. 2023 Wonka’s eccentric personality, intriguing diction, and bizarre candy ingredients (as well as their side effects) pay homage to the traits of all Wonkas from the past.

To be truthful, I did not have high hopes for this film going into the theater. However, I was proved wrong with the fascinating plot, auditory experience, and extravagant visuals. The experience was a treat (no pun intended), and I left with the jolting feeling that cinematography was, once again, alive – and sweet. •

