

## “GHOST RIDER: SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE” (Movie Review)

Written by Ken Michaels

Friday, 17 February 2012 12:54

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Nicolas Cage is the cursed Johnny Blaze again in GHOST RIDER: SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE, and the movie is kind of cursed as well, in the sense that while it's better than you might expect, it's not as good as you might hope.

The “better than you might expect” part involves the fact that this sequel was hidden from critics prior to its release today, and also to the fact that it's more fun than the first GHOST RIDER. That has a lot to do with the fact that Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, the maniacs behind the CRANK films, were in the director's chairs this time—or in the case of Neveldine, at least, flying around on wires and zooming along on rollerblades to get their usual crazy shots. Perhaps it was the restrictions involved in working with a couple of monoliths like Sony Pictures and Marvel, though, or the fact that they had to deliver a PG-13 movie, but the two never get to go as insane as they did when they were CRANK-ing things up, and they were bound by a pretty formula storyline as well.



Cage's hellspawned antihero goes on a quest to rescue a child from a demonic cult led by a dark-haired, handsome devil, which wants to use said child for a rite that will mean bad news

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for the rest of us, accompanied on his journey by a gorgeous young woman and pursued by a majordomo from the underworld...but enough about the plot of DRIVE ANGRY. Actually—oops, that’s the basic plot of SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE too, which is probably a coincidence given that its origins lie in a screenplay written 10 years ago by David S. Goyer (has this guy ever been part of a movie where he hasn’t been rewritten, aside from those he’s directed himself?). Anyway, here the child is Danny (Fergus Riordan), who is coveted by Carrigan (Johnny Whitworth), evil-worshipper and all-around nasty ex-boyfriend of Danny’s hot mom Nadya (Violente Placido, the best name on an actress this year).

Hiding out somewhere in Eastern Europe and trying to keep his Ghost Rider persona at bay, Johnny is approached by Moreau (Idris Elba), one of a group of rebel monks sworn to protect Danny. Moreau convinces Johnny to join their cause with the promise of being rewarded by getting his curse lifted, and it’s an offer Johnny can’t refuse. But it’s gonna be a tough job, since Carrigan has on his side Roarke (Ciarán Hinds), a.k.a. the devil himself with whom Johnny originally made his ill-fated deal. That backstory is told early in the film via some pretty cool animation, which, along with a nifty car chase along a mountain road, nicely sets up the movie’s anything-goes spirit, making it clear that Nevelandine and Taylor were the right guys for this job.

They bring their customary energy to other action scenes too, including one in which the Ghost Rider commandeers an impossibly huge excavator and turns it into a huge flaming death machine. Whenever the hotheaded hero is smashing metal and taking out bad buys, GHOST RIDER: SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE is good, trashy fun, and Cage seems to be having a good time in the part, reveling in the chance to go to the nuttier potential extremes of the Johnny Blaze role. Elba and Hinds, two actors we’re used to seeing in more serious roles, look like they’re having fun too; there are times you can almost see them winking at the camera. Placido (actually, can’t I just call her Violante?) is spunky and determined as her role requires, and there’s fun casting in the margins, like Christopher Lambert as a monk with writing all over his bald head and BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER’s Anthony Head as another religious do-gooder.

All those parts don’t add up to a fully entertaining whole, though, since the story proceeds without many surprises, hitting all the expected beats with too few twists, and the dialogue isn’t as clever as the camerawork, especially when it strains for laugh lines. Whenever the action slows down to ponder the existential whatever of Johnny Blaze’s situation, you just want him to shut up and get back to the business of breaking out his flaming chain and busting heads. As if this fiery destruction of human bodies isn’t enough, Carrigan eventually undergoes a transformation that gives him a deleterious power of his own, but it’s accompanied by a weird visual flourish whenever he offs someone that almost literally takes the audience out of the scene.

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Oh yeah, the movie's in 3D, which helps sell a few of the action beats, but since it's a post-conversion job, it lacks the true clarity and depth you get from a film shot in the process. (Like...DRIVE ANGRY.) Perhaps that's fitting, since the characters are largely one-dimensional too, no matter how much the actors commit to performing them. GHOST RIDER: SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE delivers the goods on a superficial level, and it's a step in the right direction from its disappointing predecessor; let's hope that if there's a third one, they pay as much attention to the spirit as to the vengeance.

