SEASON OF THE WITCH opens this Friday, and you can bet that director Dominic Sena is hoping it does better at the box office than his last film, WHITEOUT, which came and went quickly in theaters in September 2009. Starring Kate Beckinsale, Gabriel Macht and Alex O’Loughlin, and based on the comic by writer Greg Rucka and artist Steve Lieber, the movie didn’t make much of an impression with audiences—or critics. Read Michael Gingold’s thoughts after the jump.

Despite minor genre trappings sprinkled throughout, WHITEOUT isn’t really a horror film. That hasn’t stopped Warner Bros. from trying to sell WHITEOUT like one, though what they’re pitching as a literal chiller about a malevolent presence terrorizing an South Pole research station turns out to be a mystery/suspense drama without mystery, suspense or drama.

Kate Beckinsale trades in her UNDERWORLD leather garb for a parka to play U.S. Marshal Carrie Stetko, who’s about to wrap up a stint on Antarctica (which the film helpfully reminds us is “the coldest, most isolated land mass on the planet”). Within the film’s first eight minutes, she and the filmmakers demonstrate that they’ve remembered her fans via a lengthy shower scene, but she has barely freshened up before she’s confronted with a new, serious case: a dead body has been spotted out in the middle of the frozen wastes. Her examination of the corpse at the site and its further postmortem by station doctor John Fury (Tom Skerritt in the Kris Kristofferson part) reveal that the guy was murdered, and Carrie sets out to warn the other two members of his team before they fall victim. What she’ll discover, and the audience will already know from a prologue, is that this and (only a couple of) subsequent deaths are tied in to a Russian cargo plane that went down in the area in 1957 after its occupants got into an ill-advised on-board gunfight.

The opening act borrows quite a bit from the 1982 THING playbook, only without John Carpenter’s brooding sense of menace and a protagonist with the grit and edge of Kurt Russell. Beckinsale seems to be operating at half-energy here, and she’s not the only one; despite an impressive physical production (frigid locations courtesy of Manitoba, Canada) and occasional applications of an ice ax, director Dominic Sena fails to build any sort of tension or urgency into either the dramatic or suspense scenes. (Ace action specialist Stuart Baird’s credit as “supervising editor” suggests an attempt was made to save the movie in the cutting room, to little avail.) A major fight sequence outside the station is impossible to follow, given that those involved are all bundled under cold-weather gear in the midst of blinding snow, and when three of the principals suddenly become trapped under 20 feet of ice with no apparent means of escape or hope of rescue, they react with all the concern of folks who just missed a bus.

The source material, Greg Rucka and Steve Lieber’s highly regarded graphic novel, was adapted by Jon Hoeber & Erich Hoeber and Chad Hayes & Carey W. Hayes, but the script’s creation by a pair of brother teams is its only novelty. WHITEOUT proceeds as a series of overly familiar setpieces enacted by half-formed characters; supporting players Gabriel Macht, Columbus Short, Alex O’Loughlin and Skerritt have been given little to do, and look like they know it. On a physical level, at least, it’s clear everyone involved busted their humps under challengingly cold conditions (or studio recreations thereof), and it’s a shame their efforts have resulted in a movie that’s as flat as the Antarctic plains.

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