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We start out in a cafe, where young Dumbledore (Jude Law) nervously awaits a companion for tea. That companion turns out to be the dastardly Grindelwald, now played by Mads Mikkelsen. The two share a tense discussion about their past and Grindelwald's plans to commit genocide and wipe the earth of Muggles (non-magic folk for those not up on Harry Potter terms). They also mention the blood oath they took as young lovers, making it impossible for either one to harm or even think of harming the other.

Yes, we have a canonically gay Dumbledore, and while that's great, the script likes to tell the audience their history countless times rather than mention it and then let the actors, you know, act the rest. But I digress.

Knowing Grindelwald's trajectory, Dumbledore, as always, enlists the help of plucky, eager-to-please students (or in this case former ones) to help fight his battles for him. This time he gathers Newt Scamander (Eddie Redmayne), fresh from saving a newborn horse-like fantastic beast known as a qilin, which has the magical ability to tell when someone is pure of heart.

Meanwhile in Queens, New York, Jacob Kowalski (Dan Fogler) is in his bakery and depressed, still longing for fiancée Queenie (Alison Sudol), who joined Grindelwald on the dark side in the last film. While he's moping around getting ready to work one morning, he meets a witch named Lally Hicks (Jessica Williams), a charms teacher from the American version of Hogwarts. She convinces Jacob to join her and Newt in trying to save the world again, as part of Dumbledore's plan.

The two meet up with Newt, his brother Theseus Scamander (Callum Turner), his assistant Bunty (Victoria Yeates), and Yusuf Kama (William Nadylam) a cousin of Leta Lestrange (who died in the second movie). The task is to do some reconnaissance and make sure Grindelwald is captured or taken out. But when the team gets to Berlin in time for the election of the next leader of the wizarding world, things immediately go south.

There seem to have been some major



Warner Bros

Jessica Williams and Callum Turner perform in a scene from "Fantastic Beasts."

Another point of contention is the overall tone of the film. While it's dealing with the threat of genocide, all-out war, political subterfuge and the like, it's undercut by silliness that dilutes the main core of the action. In its attempt to recapture the magic that director David Yates has accomplished in the past, it comes off tonally like two different movies trying to be told, with storylines that don't necessarily mesh together.

course corrections after the previous film, including the key plot points and putting more fantastic beasts into the movie. But it

all seems very forced, and it's too little too late for the franchise.

Mikkelsen does a great job with what he's given. He and Law play off each other's tension and love as well as they can, given the text. Because of all the controversy surrounding Rowling, it feels like there were major steps to make the film more diverse in its casting and make the love story between Dumbledore and Grindelwald front and center. That's nice, but it feels slightly disingenuous.

Also, because it is front and center, this film is more Dumbledore than Newt Scamander, which is odd given that this supposed to be his series.

We also seem to have lost a main character from the first two films as Tina (Katherine Waterston) is only mentioned a few times, alluded to in photographs and shows up for less than two minutes of total screen time throughout. Now, Waterston did have a bout of COVID, so it's reasonable to assume that's the reason why she was mostly cut, but it feels odd to have one of your main characters barely in the movie at all.

As for the newcomers, Williams and Nadylam, their stories — in fact everyone's stories — have little to no character arc throughout, and Nadylam seems more like an afterthought than anything else. Williams, on the other hand, gets a great deal of screen time, and while Lally seems like a cool character, we don't get much beyond the fact that she's good at spells and she has a transatlantic accent (which Williams muddles through).

Again, though better than its predecessor, the film lacks any real feelings of excitement

More Information

"Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore"

142 minutes

Rated PG-13 for some fantasy action/violence



or cohesive storytelling. Note that this is the first time in which Steve Kloves was given a co-credit on Rowling's script, and it shows — the dialogue is much improved, but it's still riddled with exposition.

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While Yates, Kloves and their team have tried their best to course-correct the franchise, which has two more planned follow-ups, it feels like it's flown too far away from its core audience and purpose. Each film just seems like a letdown.

■ *Makenzie Whittle is a freelance movie critic and photographer and has an MFA in dramatic writing from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. She can be reached at makenziewhittle.com.*



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