

Kenneth Branagh's whodunit sets sail, but is it worth the trip?

'Death on the Nile'

By Moira Macdonald
The Seattle Times

These days — let us hope, for not too much longer — a movie has to be something special to lure an audience into a theater, something you just can't wait to see, something that would be diminished if watched on a screen at home.

Unfortunately, Kenneth Branagh's "Death on the Nile" is not one of those movies. It's a perfectly serviceable entertainment, albeit one that's been hit with more than its share of bad luck: multiple delays of its original December 2020 release date, due to the pandemic and to sexual assault allegations against star Armie Hammer (who's been neatly reduced to blink-and-you'll-miss-him status in the movie's trailer). But it's just a little flat, like a party — remember those? — full of interesting guests that nonetheless has more than its share of awkward pauses.

As director and star, Branagh gets both the credit and the blame. He's a delight as Agatha Christie's famed Belgian detec-



Rob Youngson/Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation
From left, Gal Gadot, Emma Mackey and Armie Hammer in "Death on the Nile."

tive Hercule Poirot, a portrayal first unveiled in Branagh's 2017 film "Murder on the Orient Express." Just the way he pronounces "vege-tables" is a feast, as is the way this meticulous gentleman carefully adjusts a corpse's legs so as to be more symmetrical, and fusses over the possibility of an odd number of desserts. The

film even gives us a mustache origin story — Poirot's eely facial hair is a trademark — and a poignant romantic past.

But while I'd happily watch an entire movie purely about how Poirot became a detective in the first place, here we're focused mostly on a few days in 1937. In typical Christie fashion, an assortment of distinc-

(i.e., some hardworking British soundstages) on a posh yacht. Tensions are flared, eyebrows are raised, a gun is fired ... and just like that, somebody's dead, and Poirot needs to figure out whodunit.

Herein, though, lies a big part of the problem. In "Murder on the Orient Express," the character bumped off was certainly the one I'd have voted off the metaphorical island; in "Death on the Nile," it's the one who's pretty much been holding the movie together, and things seem stale once that person is gone. And while Poirot is always witty, few of the other characters are. Michael Green's screenplay often feels weirdly detached, like we missed some crucial early scenes that tell us why we should care about these people.

All that said, it's no great hardship to watch "Death on the Nile"; it looks pretty, feels pleasantly old-school and is over within shouting distance of the two-hour mark. I'm hoping, though, that we haven't seen the last of Branagh's Poirot; I suspect he might have a few more cases up his elegantly tailored sleeve.

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