

'Robocop' remake has plenty of muscle but needs heart



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RoboCop (2014)

Rating:

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The remake of “Robocop” makes reference to the Tin Man from “The Wizard of Oz” more than once in connection to its cyborg hero. The point is probably more ironic than intended. Although certainly not lacking in action, special effects or visual spectacle, “Robocop” begs the question “If I only had a heart.”

Joel Kinnaman (AMC’s “The Killing”) takes over the role of Alex Murphy, a Detroit cop in the near future left for dead after a savage attack by gangsters, and who becomes a prototype crime-fighting cyborg. In Paul Verhoeven’s 1987 original, Murphy, played by Peter Weller, was virtually blown to pieces by shotguns in front of the camera. A car bomb does the damage here, and strange to say, it’s far more antiseptic.

Verhoeven, who at the time was best known for his Dutch movie “Soldier of Orange,” which introduced most of the world to Rutger Hauer, brought a distinctly European sensibility to “Robocop,” his first big Hollywood movie. Even by the standards of the bone-crunching action movies of the eighties, the violence in “Robocop” was over the top, and Verhoeven did it with a gleeful abandon.

Not to say the new movie isn't violent - it is. An army of stuntmen big enough to invade a small country falls off buildings and crashes through hundreds of spun sugar windows in a frenetically choreographed pageant of largely bloodless mayhem. As with last year's ill-conceived "reimagining" of Verhoeven's "Total Recall," an extremely gruesome and deservedly R-rated 80's action movie has been toned down to a more teenage fanboy accessible PG-13. That's a corporate, bean-counting, business decision, not a creative one, and the result feels diluted, if not actually neutered.

Brazilian director José Padilha ("Elite Squad") has made a technically impressive action movie here, but it's very much a triumph of form over substance. Screenwriter Joshua Zetumer's script is less focused than the original by Edward Neumeier and Michael Miner, with a long first act dealing with Robocop's origins rather than getting him on the street and killing bad guys. (In the original, the transformation of Murphy into Robocop was accomplished in a much shorter montage.) That single change highlights the difference between the two movies. The remake is less a science fiction "Dirty Harry" than it is a character study and a meditation on man's relationship with technology.

You can argue with some validity that the remake is a superior character study, but the question remains whether that's what the audience wants to see. Whereas in the original Robocop initially has no memories of Alex Murphy once activated, in the new version Murphy's personality is artificially toned down after the surgical procedures. Apparently Murphy's human emotions undermine Robocop's programming. The reasoning for this doesn't make a lot of sense, but is supposed to make the story seem more personal. It doesn't. Robocop's beginning to recall his prior life in dreams actually had more pathos, which is not to disparage Kinnaman, who is fine in the role, and has the advantage of more screen time without the visor covering his face than Weller did. Kinnaman also has a frankly superb scene, in which Murphy sees what little is left of his body when the armored robot parts are taken away. The visual effect alone is startling, and Kinnaman's reaction is both believable and heartrending.

The supporting cast is an embarrassment of riches, including Gary Oldman as the well-meaning Frankenstein-like doctor who creates Robocop, Michael Keaton as the corporate CEO, Abbie Cornish as Murphy's wife, Jackie Earle Haley as a robotics combat expert, Jay Baruchel as a vapid marketing executive and Samuel L. Jackson, as an hysterically funny parody of a Fox News talking head. If anything the big name cast is slightly distracting, although they add undeniable star power. It is bitterly ironic, though, that the wonderful Ms.

Cornish has little to do but whine about not being allowed to see her husband. Even in Verhoeven's most commercial projects, colorful and interesting female characters tended to abound. One notes that Murphy had a female partner in the original "Robocop," played by Nancy Allen, and she shot guns and everything. It was Verhoeven who first cast Sharon Stone as a bitch in "Total Recall," after a string of bland ingenue roles in movies like "King Solomon's Mines," "Action Jackson," "Above the Law" and the TV miniseries "War and Remembrance."

Padilha and Zetumer has also upped the political subtext, which speaks directly to our present day world, in which the American military is constantly deployed and drone strikes are already a reality. Neumeier and Miner's original screenplay took some sly potshots at Wall Street and corporate America, reflecting the same attitudes of Oliver Stone's "Wall Street," which came out the same year, but the message was secondary to delivering the goods. Corporate America doesn't come off any better here, but now we've brought in outsourcing (Robocop is built in China) and the mideast conflict, and it does slow things down. "Robocop" is only 108 minutes long, but feels longer. No spoilers, but the ending of the original has not been retained, and it was better.

The remake also feels imitative, when it's predecessor became an iconic model for later movies. Where the clanking, metallic footsteps and buzzing joints of the original Robocop may have served as a model for Iron Man, the sleeker, streamlined, black armored new version, streaking through the streets of Detroit on a souped-up motorcycle, evokes Christopher Nolan's "The Dark Knight" without a cape. Much like its title character, "Robocop" is sleek and flashy, but heart has been replaced with programming.