

Downton Abbey: A New Era

They're back! No, no, I do not mean another "Chucky" horror flick but rather another chapter of the "Downton Abbey" saga. The Granthams and the Crawleys are back, this time with an overseas twist. "The New Era" has, besides the familiar and talented cast, yet another beguiling script from the series' creator, Julian Fellowes (here also credited as producer), and is directed by Simon Curtis.

A pre-credit opening introduces us to the ever-anxious Mr. Molesley (Kevin Doyle), who offers a very useful recap of the last "Downton" film (from 2019) and catches us up on the Granthams, the Crawleys, and their extended family as well as the bevy of staff who serve them.

The time is 1928, and a major plot point is the news that Violet, the Dowager Countess (Maggie Smith) learns, late in life, that she has inherited a villa in Southern France from "an old friend." A second major plot element, mingled with the first, is that the Downton estate has been selected by a major British film company as the location for a frilly period piece and who will, in effect, take over the manse as their set. The Crawleys roughly split into two factions, one to head for the villa (headed by Lord and Lady Grantham (Hugh Bonneville and Elizabeth McGovern) and the other to observe the shoot, headed by Lady Mary (Michelle Dockery).

The English contingent is welcomed by a genial relative, the Marquis of Montmirail (Jonathan Zaccai), but also must contend with an intransigent Mademoiselle Montmirail (veteran French actress Natalie Baye), who refuses the English family's right to the property. The dilemma for the group back at Downton is that the film company—already on shaky ground financially—learns that, with the beginning of the sound era, their silent film might be shut down.

In the latter instance, even casual movie fans will recognize a neat reprise of the premise of the classic "Singing in the Rain," wherein a harsh-voiced film star is replaced by the young ingenue whose sweet delivery turns a silent movie clinker into a smash. Here, the voice savior is Lady Mary herself, who records lines to replace the crass cockney accent of the lead actress, Myrna Dalgleish (Laura Haddock).

For the rest, the Downton cast rings comfortable changes on their standard roles from the original series and earlier film. For example, hide-bound Carson (Jim Carter) thinks the movie escapade is an affront to Downton's dignity while bubbly Daisy (Sophie McShera), besotted with Hollywood, is thrilled to ogle the stars. Lord Grantham plays variations on his usual befuddled, out-of-it self, being both skeptical of the movie business as well as his own lineage, i.e. whether the Dowager Countess is really his mother. Both Violet and Mrs. Isobel Crawley (Penelope Wilton) pursue their typical sniping at each other—though their verbal tussling moves closer to affection as the story spins out. Newcomers to the cast include English studs known to American TV audiences: Dominick West ("The

Wire”) as Guy Dexter, the smooth star of the film and Hugh Dancy (“Law and Order”) as the decent film director, Jack Barber, who falls for Lady Mary. With the film’s extras walking out on the film for lack of payment, ten of the house’s staff agree to sit in for the final party shoot, and merriment reigns as they all are filmed wearing costume finery—to everyone’s delight (including the audiences!)

Major family mileposts are again marked, with the film opening with a lively wedding scene with Tom Branson (Alan Leech) and his intended, Lucy (Tuppence Middleton). There are an additional three other couplings during the climax of the show, as well as one touching and considerate death. The latter provides a satisfying wrap-up for this film as well as for what has become a cultural icon (at least according to Mr. Molesley).

Bon Voyage!

(The film, now in theaters, is rated “PG” and runs 124 jolly minutes.)

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