‘Dark Shadows’ underwhelming

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After eight films together, director Tim Burton and star Johnny Depp seem to have perfected how to mesh their talents, but it’s too bad their latest venture, “Dark Shadows” is pretty underwhelming and features quite a few one-note characters.

“Shadows” is the story of Barnabas Collins, a wealthy man in Maine in the late 1700s (Maine became a state in 1820), whose family built the town of Collinsport from the ground up, literally.

After spurning a young woman Angelique, (Eva Green) who turned out to be a witch, Barnabas’s true love Josette (Bella Heathcote) is bewitched to walk off a cliff and Barnabas is cursed to live as a vampire, buried for centuries.

He awakes in 1972 Collinsport to find the remnants of his family a shut-in ruin and his old home in disarray. Barnabas must learn to cope with the 20th century and defeat the witch Angelique to return his family to their former glory.

But at the same time when the film switches to 1972 we’re led to believe the primary plot would involve young Victoria Winters, played by Heathcote, coming to the family home to be the governess of 12-year-old David (Gulliver McGrath) because he apparently is suffering from mental issues.

However, Victoria is on screen for maybe 25 minutes of the film’s nearly two-hour runtime. Also, David shows little mental difficulties besides laying a sheet over himself pretending to be a ghost and claiming he still sees and talks to his dead mother.

The latter may seem alarming, but it’s treated whimsically as if writer Seth Grahame-Smith doesn’t even believe what he is selling. Barnabas returns from the grave in brutal fashion and we’re given a few laughs from lady of the house Elizabeth (Michelle Pfeiffer) and Barnabas trying to hide the fact that he is a vampire.

The writing plays right into Depp’s hands, as he is the only character that receives due attention and the only character that wasn’t one-dimensional. The rest are merely set pieces, which I felt was a disservice to the film’s history in the soap opera that featured many prominent characters besides Barnabas.

Two of Barnabas’s three motives make sense: his desire to free himself of the curse and to restore the family name. Why he wants to love Victoria is anyone’s guess because we don’t really know what makes her so lovable, besides Barnabas’s nostalgic longing for Josette’s apparent twin.

Barnabas seeks advice from Carolyn, the “hippy” daughter of Elizabeth played by Chloe Grace Moretz. Carolyn is just around to dance to music of the times, look stoned and a shockingly off-the-wall moment at the end.

Every other character was borderline useless or one-dimensional for much of the film.

Elizabeth is a grim relic who moves around simply to bounce dialogue off of Barnabas when necessary. Victoria, as previously mentioned, is absent for most of the film. David also shares little screen time and does or says very little while on screen anyway.

Green as the witch Angelique is singular in her purpose as the film’s antagonist. She hates Barnabas and wishes his family dead. She’s also obsessed with making Barnabas love her, but why she loves him we don’t know.

The performance of Green slips from “unconvincing” to “trying too hard” to match Depp’s presence. While Depp has a handle on the 18th century style of Barnabas and convincingly delivers his dialogue and accent, Green stumbles.

The addition of many odd and often just annoying sexual encounters and activities were obviously present simply for laughs.

The film has little resolution and provides no payoff for its characters that don’t grow, expand or develop in any meaningful way.

The set-up for a sequel was an unfortunate turn of events. After watching a couple episodes of the original show online, I’d much rather spend a night with the black-and-white aura of “Dark Shadows” than Burton’s alternative.

“Dark Shadows” is rated PG-13 and has a runtime of 1 hour 53 minutes.

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