

‘The Beekeeper’ Review: Jason Statham has more than a bee in his bonnet

January 14, 2024

Online Desk: Secret agents and murderous assassins seem to lurk in increasingly mundane places.

Remember “The Accountant” with Ben Affleck? Or “The Tax Collector” with Shia LaBeouf? Or more recently, how about “The Bricklayer” with Adam Eckhardt? You probably don’t — none of these films were exactly Oscar winners. But there’s probably a notary public somewhere wondering when he’s going to get his Liam Neeson treatment.

“The Beekeeper,” the new Jason Statham revenge thriller, may have them all beaten — or at least bee-ten. The film, directed by David Ayer (who also did “The Tax Collector”) has found probably the widest disparity yet between innocuous occupation and savage killer. As bodies accrue, so do the double takes from those confused by the source of all the mayhem. Again and again they utter in disbelief: “A beekeeper?”

Believe it, honey. “The Beekeeper” carries that ludicrous premise as far as it can, and then well beyond. If you’ve been searching for a movie where Jason Statham gravely vows to “protect the hive” an implausible number of times, you have found it.

The bee metaphors — there is even, rather impressively, a “To bee or not to bee” reference — come fast and furious in “The Beekeeper,” a movie that flirts with a so-bad-it’s-good vibe but is too serious to quite pull it off. It can be divertingly bonkers, but ends up a rather grim and slipshod “John Wick” ripoff.

The film, scripted by Kurt Wimmer, begins the action with one of the more absurd inciting incidents in recent memory. Statham is a humble beekeeper for Eloise Parker (Phylicia Rashad) on a New England farm. She soon falls victim to a phishing scam that robs her of all her money, including the \$2 million charity fund she manages. Eloise calls a number that pops up on her screen and is talked into sharing her passwords by a smarmy scammer (David Witts) who’s simultaneously using the call as a lesson to a room full of hackers who cheer him on like the predatory stock brokers of “The Wolf of Wall Street.”

Eloise doesn’t press CTRL-ALT-DELETE or even call the fraud department of her bank. She kills herself. And guess who’s mad? The beekeeper.

Eloise’s daughter, Verona (a good Emmy Raver-Lampman), is an FBI agent who throws herself into the case. But meanwhile Statham’s beekeeper, after a well-placed call, gets the location of the call center. He turns up with a few tanks of gasoline and some terse words about, you know, the hive, and burns down the place, killing a few people along the way.

That brings the attention of higher-ups. Only the guy in charge is a 28-year-old twerp named Derek Danforth (Josh Hutcherson, enjoying himself) who brashly underestimates his new enemy at every step of the way. His entitlement is owed to his rather good connections. He’s protected by the former head of the CIA, Wallace Westwyld (Jeremy Irons) and happens to be the son of the U.S. president (Jemma Redgrave).

Fingers get cut off and bodies accumulate as our man — his name turns out to be Adam Clay — tears through the criminal apparatus with ruthless blunt force. Statham, who has both the look and personality of a bullet, dispatches anyone in his path with the kind efficiency I dream of bringing to opening a pickle jar. A few twists of the wrist and he’s done.

Clay, brace yourselves, isn't just an actual beekeeper. He's a retired Beekeeper, an elite, clandestine secret service that operates well off the government books and that adopts a surprising amount of its mission statements from the natural way of bees. They have a whole secret order and stuff, bringing "The Beekeeper" into plainly "Wick"-ian — and less fun — territory.

Yes, this silly beekeeper thriller goes all the way to the top. As the movie's renegade protagonist makes his way closer and closer to the White House, with blood and chaos in his wake, "The Beekeeper" begins to feel like an uncomfortable B-movie crosspollination of today's conspiracy theory-marred political landscape, with a violent, self-appointed guardian of America slashing his way toward the president. Most of the dead bodies are secret service.

Disquieting thoughts, maybe, for a beekeeper movie. Ayer's movie is mostly just having some cynical world-building fun, even if its hero feels like a part more suited to Mr. Bean. And, besides, while John Wick was first propelled into action by the death of his dog, Clay doesn't bat an eye when his honeycombs get blown to smithereens. This guy doesn't even really care about bees.

"The Beekeeper" an MGM release, is rated R by the Motion Picture Association for strong violence throughout, pervasive language, some sexual references and drug use. Running time: 105 minutes. Two stars out of four.