Today is Nicolas Cage’s 47th birthday. Happy birthday, Nic! In that spirit, I’m going to try to accentuate the positive in this review of his new movie SEASON OF THE WITCH, and will start by stating that in the Cage genre pantheon, it is unequivocally better than THE WICKER MAN.

It certainly doesn’t lack for ambition, in terms of both story and scope. The film opens with a lengthy montage of key battles in the Crusades, with all the clanging swords, CGI masses and slo-mo splatter these sorts of cinematic clashes entail these days. Our central fighters are Behmen (Cage) and his good buddy Felson (Ron Perlman), who as the religious war goes on become troubled—Behmen in particular—by all the blood they’re shedding in the name of God. They deal with the stress by trading banter about stuff like who’s buying drinks after this or that clash—one of many anachronistic touches that kinda deflate the experience for the audience too.

SEASON also has an interestingly diverse ensemble, additionally including ubiquitous Danish actor Ulrich Thomsen as the knight Eckhart, THE CHILDREN’s Stephen Campbell Moore as holy man Debelzaq and Stephen Graham (so good as the young Al Capone in BOARDWALK EMPIRE) as wandering con artist Hagamar, all of whom Behmen and Felson encounter in a remote village after deserting the army. This sort of casting eclecticism has its pitfalls, though, as these guys seem to be acting in three different movies: Cage and Perlman, as noted above, in a knockabout buddy movie, Thomsen and Moore in a gravely serious period drama and Graham in a contemporary-toned comedy.

Said village is one of many that have been ravaged by the Black Plague, and when their desertion is discovered by Eckhart and Debelzaq, Behmen and Felson are blackmailed into going on a quest that might halt the disease. A young woman (Claire Foy) currently being held in the burg’s dungeon is suspected of being a witch who has caused the pestilence, and Behmen and Felson are dragooned into escorting her to an even more remote monastery, where the monks will try her and, if she proves to be a sorceress, put an end to her and the Plague. Eckhart and Debelzaq join them on the journey, with Hagamar pressed into service as their guide and aspiring holy warrior Kay (Robert Sheehan) also tagging along. They’re all send on the mission by the Plague-ravaged Cardinal D’Ambroise, played by horror legend Christopher Lee, a welcome if brief presence who maintains his perfect diction even though the Cardinal’s mouth has been twisted and his lips half eaten away by the disease.

As the band make their way though forbidding forests, along sheer cliffs, over rickety bridges and other picturesquely dangerous environments, SEASON OF THE WITCH hints at a spiritual conflict as well: Is the girl actually a witch or just a handy scapegoat for the menace of the Plague, and does she or the Church pose the more significant threat? Unfortunately, this kernel of a compelling idea doesn’t pop because director Dominic Sena and writer Bragi Schut make it clear early on that she’s supernaturally endowed, and as the story goes on, she’s able to do things like call down a vicious pack of wolves whose faces digitally snap into hellhound visages. And because this is a Hollywood production instead of a more daring indie (like the upcoming BLACK DEATH, for handy example), it’s inevitable that it’ll all end up with an apocalyptic showdown at the monastery, which includes the memorable sight of Perlman trying to head-butt a huge CG beastie into submission.

The sizable budget does mean that SEASON OF THE WITCH has proficient craft credits, including Amir Mokri’s cinematography and Uli Hanisch’s production design; Atli Örvarsson’s score has all the world-music flavor and chanting required for a film like this. It’s just a shame that the period atmosphere tends to go out the window when the characters drop bon mots like, “We’re gonna need more holy water.” Had SEASON’s makers fully embraced a wise-guy attitude toward their subject matter, and Cage gone for more gonzo gusto in his performance, they could have delivered an over-the-top treat; instead, he’s earnest and the tone is all over the place throughout, resulting in a film that doesn’t live up to its potential for either scares or fun.

{jcomments on}