

Review of *Constantine* ★★

By Paul Bachleitner

Filmgoers with low expectations will find *Constantine* surprisingly enjoyable despite its ultimate failure.

From the very first shot *Constantine* takes its metaphors literally. Viewers are told that the Spear of Destiny, the spear a Roman soldier used to hasten Christ's death, has been missing since World War II. Sure enough, it's uncovered in the wastes of a Mexican desert by a grimy derelict possessed by a demon. Keanu Reeves as the title character, John Constantine, must foil a plot involving the spear or demons will flood the earth.

It's not nearly as outlandish as it sounds, at least until the film's third act, because Constantine discovers the plot gradually. He learns that demons are trying to break into the world when he dispels one, a la *The Exorcist*, from a girl who turns her head 360 degrees and climbs the walls. His friend is murdered spectacularly supernaturally while following up on a lead. Viewers can believe the self-pity in a comment Constantine directs to a bug he traps in a glass, "Welcome to my life."

The terse dialogue and scowl Keanu Reeves perfected as *The Matrix* trilogy's protagonist, Neo, are the default settings for his role as *Constantine*'s protagonist. Constantine, like *The Matrix*'s Neo, is a reluctant hero. No he can't do kung fu or slow-motion back bends, but he can identify half-breed angels and demons and kill them.

As it goes in the film's trailer, "Hell wants him. Heaven won't take him. Earth needs him." So does Rachel Weisz as the twin sister of a woman who jumps from a hospital roof and asks Constantine to help her prove the death was not a suicide. Whether at the character's persistence or because of Weisz's piquant charm, he takes her to hell and back on an investigation of what might be described as the filmmakers' spiritual iconography, consisting of holy water from the River Jordan, dragon's breath, plenty of Bible elements, and even a cough suppressant.

The film claims to be adapted from the "Hellblazer" series of graphic novels, but a more appropriate reference might be *The Matrix* film trilogy. *Constantine*'s cut-and-paste mythology, like that of *The Matrix*, is interesting as its creativeness unfolds like a hard-boiled supernatural mystery.

But *Constantine* tends to rely too much on heavy expressions culled from *The Matrix*, like "world behind the world" or "the road to salvation begins tonight." *Constantine* collapses beneath its own weight well before its climax. By the end, despite a great

scene with Peter Stormare as Satan, the film is as mediocre as *The Matrix* trilogy. I give it two out of four stars. For KFAI, I'm Paul Bachleitner.