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Review: Footloose (2011)

Today, Hollywood seems like a big-budget factory spewing out remakes and sequels that no one really asked for. It feels exhausting, arbitrary and even offensive at times. Especially when your childhood favorite gets a reboot (I'm looking at you live-action Kim Possible movie).

There are some works that feel too sacred to even think about remaking due to their cinematic excellence or impact. While it is no masterpiece of a film, the 1984 teen flick "Footloose" had enough cultural significance that made it seem untouchable to tamper with. Like it was locked in a time capsule along with leg warmers and Wham! 8-tracks.

"Footloose" (1984) is by no means a perfect, five star movie. But it did give the world Kevin Bacon and Kenny Loggins smash hit. It is an iconic film. And many were just short of outraged when a remake of this beloved film was coming to theaters.

However, the 2011 remake from Craig Brewster ("Hustle & Flow," "Black Snake Moan") was better than the original.

"Footloose" (1984) was one of many adolescent dance staples of the 80s, among the ranks of "Dirty Dancing" and "Fame." So it seemed appropriate to revamp it after the success of modern dance franchises like "Step Up" and "High School Musical."

"Footloose" (2011) is teenage melodrama at its finest. With more electric energy on the dance floor and between the characters than the original, the film is an example of a remake done right. It perfectly toes the line between paying respect to the original while finding its own, updated style and message that is authentic, emotional and fun.

While the remake follows the same story beats as the original, and has many shot-for-shot and line-for-line parallels, it adds unique twists with deeper emotion.

On their way home from a rowdy party, five teenagers in Bomont, GA are killed in a car accident. This tragedy leads the council of community leaders, including Reverend Shaw Moore (Dennis Quaid), who lost his son in the crash, to enact strict laws banning nefarious things at the party like loud music and public dancing.

Three years later, the small town is still living under the watchful eye of well intentioned parents, but the young people still find ways to sneak around the rules. This includes Moore's daughter Ariel (Julianne Hough), who skips out after church in her cut of shorts and red cowgirl boots to make-out with her race car driving older boyfriend Chuck (Patrick John Flueger).

Enter Ren McCormack (Kenny Wormald): a dancer who moves to town from Boston to live with his uncle, aunt and two adorable cousins after his mother dies. With a chip on his shoulder, Ren scoffs at authority and the culture of the conservative southern town.

In 2007, Zac Efron, the Disney singing heartthrob of the 2000s, was cast as the lead, but left the project two years later following the departure of director Kenny Ortega ("High School Musical," "Cheetah Girls," "Dirty Dancing"). This duo together again would have brought a very "of-the-times" tone and style targeted towards the new generation. But the decision to go with an unknown actor to follow in Bacon's steps was a better move.

Kevin Bacon was actually offered a small role in the remake. At a Paley Center event in 2013, Bacon said he turned down the role because "it was a lousy part." He was to be cast as Ren's father, a character Bacon described as a "miserable prick" who would have "done a disservice to the film." When Bacon declined the offer, the character was cut. However, Bacon said he did enjoy the film.

While the original Ren approved, many critics and nostalgic fans did not. As with most reboots and remakes, people who love and grew up with the original film were upset and skeptical and even upset. The thought of even attempting to recreate the classic film felt like a personal attack.

Despite the negative response early on, the film shines. It is able to tweek the story to keep it feeling fresh and delivers better characters with fleshed out motivations.

For example, the addition of the prologue scene with the car accident sets up the strict laws right away and makes them seem less arbitrary later on. In the original film, the dance ban was a moral and religious issue spearheaded by Rev. Moore that is only later revealed to be in response to the death of his son. But in the remake, the accident hit the audience and the town right away: quick and unexpected. The immediate reaction of the entire town seems somewhat reasonable given the circumstances as an effort to protect their children's lives.

In an interview with *The New York Times*, Brewer explained why he made the change to give the film a more emotional center. "For me that's more of an American issue today," he said. "We're more of a culture that overreacts, and we overreact for the right reasons. But I think also sometimes some of the good that we try and do actually causes more harm."

Ren gets a new backstory in the remake that better explains his attitude and passion to make a change. In this version, we meet Ren after he spent months taking care of his mother as she battled cancer after his dead-beat father left them. His rebellious and defensive attitude comes from him trying to deal with this loss while also adjusting to the cultural shock of being an outsider in a small town. The helplessness he felt when facing cancer makes him determined to affect change where he has some control. It's not just about being able to have a proper prom to take Ariel out; it's deeply personal.

Wormald's natural bad-boy attitude shines through, and in his first major role, Wormald gave an authentic fish-out-of-water performance. However, it is near-impossible to emulate the same charm as Bacon. "Footloose" launched Bacon's career and remains one of his most memorable roles. While it was refreshing to see a new face who can really dance in the leading role, no one is playing "six degrees of Kenny Wormald" eight years later.

Ariel's character really comes to life in the remake. Hough takes on the role of rebellious preacher's daughter with daddy issues in a way that is more dynamic and fun than Lori Singer's rather dull portrayal in 1984. Her arc as she navigates her brother's death, the strict rules of her overprotective father and desire to break out of her good girl image is a journey to behold. She has an attitude matched only by Ren, the only person with whom she can be vulnerable. While

Hough will surely not win any acting awards, her dancing is unmatched and she does deliver powerful emotions. The scene inside the church with her father is like a gut punch in your heart.

Miles Teller as the adorkable hillbilly sidekick Willard brings a lot of charm and comic relief. He supports Ren, but also has his own arch where he learns to dance to the tune “Let’s Hear it for the Boy.” Dennis Quaid’s internal struggles between obligations to the town, the church and his family breeds sympathy and is a very different characterization of Rev Moore than John Lithgow’s “fire and brimstone” preacher of the 80s.

A major difference in the casting for the remake is the inclusion of more diversity. Brewer wanted to reflect what an average high school in the South would look like today. “I can guarantee you, if you watch the first ‘Footloose,’ there’s not one face of color, not even in the background. It’s very, very white,” he said to *The New York Times*. “But that also means I didn’t want all my kids to look like they came out of modeling school. I didn’t want the dancers to look like they’re sweating out five pounds a day. I wanted kids that were bigger and nerds that were skinnier.”

One of the best parts of both films is the soundtrack. The songs in the original film are so iconic, it was understandable for some to doubt whether the remake could even compete. But the film did what few expected: it included most of the original songs, but with a more country-twang. Kenny Loggins’ famous track was covered by country superstar Blake Shelton, and it delivers. The rest of the album includes a mix of blue grass, folk, and country-pop and rock. Highlights include a somber acoustic rendition of Bonnie Tyler’s “Holding Out for a Hero” by teenage singer-songwriter Ella Mae Bowen and “Catch Hell Blues” by The White Stripes, the perfect song when you need to dance battle your own emotions in an empty warehouse.

The film not only sounds like the original, but it looks very similar too. Many of the scenes are updated versions of the 1984 shots. In one of the best scenes in the film, Ren and Chuck face off in a macho showdown for bragging rights and Ariel’s favor. Instead of a game of chicken on tractors, 2011 Chuck challenges Ren to a race of tricked-out school buses with his crew along a figure eight track. This scene is so much more fun, dangerous and sexy than the slow burn of two agricultural utility vehicles inching towards one another in a field.

Of course at the final dance, we see the famous confetti shot and the same maroon suit and pink ruffle dress; fashion trends that should have been left in the 80s.

At its core, "Footloose" is a dance movie. And the remake outdid the original with every move. Wormald and Hough are both professional dancers; he was a backup dancer for Justin Timberlake, she is a two-time Dancing With the Stars champion. They were so talented, in fact, that choreographer Jamal Sims had to tone down their skills to make it seem more realistic. Like the music, the dance styles were mixed between hip-hop krumping, country line dancing and freestyle moves, and were always sexy and fun.

Unlike other dance movies that seem like random flash mobs of spontaneous synchronized movements among strangers, all of the dance scenes here feel believable and natural. For all the melodrama, "Footloose" manages to never fall into corny territory. Every dance is entertaining, purposeful and emotional and nothing seems over the top or thrown in to keep the characters busy.

The famous angsty solo dance in the warehouse was well choreographed and packed emotion with every grunt, kick, and throwing of grey hoodie. Wormald also performed all the dancing himself, unlike Bacon who used a body double.

Overall, the remake dives deeper into pertinent themes that resonate with 80s and 2000 teens alike. Like other films at the time, such as "The Breakfast Club" and "Ferris Bueller's Day Off," the original "Footloose" was a film about teens triumphing over the unfair rules and expectations of adults. It did this through the mere act of dancing.

But in order to be taken seriously as a remake and stand alone teen film, the 2011 version puts in more effort to send a real message. Brewer told the *New York Times* "I want it to really shake them up, and I know people will roll their eyes, but this ain't 'Glee.' We've got a little more danger in this movie. We've got more sex and tense moments."

The sexuality is more explicit in scenes between Ariel/Chuck/Ren. The emotional tension in the loud and soft moments between Ariel and her father and Ren raise the stakes and, even if it

feels over-dramatic at times, crafts an accurate portrayal of the feelings, attitudes and behavior of frustrated youth.

The film speaks for its young audience in the way it touches on the unfair proceeding of local government, condescending dismissal of young people by adults in power, handling grief, abusive relationships, and sexuality.

It presents the struggle between the longing to be independent and treated like a grown up while still maintaining integrity and respect for one's parents. And while some adults serve as antagonists in the film, there are also others who support Ren. It proves that no one, young or old, is one-dimensional. Teenagers are not all moody sacks of hormones who hate authority for no reason; they are smart, reasonable, and driven. The adults are not all condescending, fun-hating villains; they just want the best for their children, but sometimes their good intentions can be misguided.

The film also shows that outright anger and rebellion does not yield results, and sometimes, change happens slowly. While Ren is able to battle Chuck with fist fights, different tactics must be employed to handle the adult council. He checks his attitude and pride, and tries to level with them in a respectful manner. He talks to them in terms they can understand and appreciate; with Bible verses defending dancing as a jubilant expression of love for God and life in general.

The 2011 "Footloose" did what few remakes can - it paid homage to its source while elevating it in every way. Although it lacks the same cultural resonance as the original, the film is overall better. There was a time for Kevin Bacon. There was a time for synth-pop 80s jams. There was a time for teens of the 80s to "dance their ass off." But the 2011 "Footloose" remake brings a fresh, modern light to an old classic for teens today. This is our time.