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'Nanny McPhee' returns, and the result is disappointing

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"Nanny McPhee Returns" plays like a sequel designed to wallop the Americans who aren't the primary revenue stream for this franchise, and never will be.

The first film came out five years ago. It was charming. The return is more pushy than charming, which is odd given the pedigree of its key collaborators. **Emma Thompson** (right) is a wonderful performer and a skillful adapter, and the director of the film is Susanna White, who did "Bleak House" and "Jane Eyre" for the BBC. The combo seemed auspicious.

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That first film, which White did not direct, balanced comically sinister child-discipline tactics and whimsical romance. The sequel (already out on the DVD shelves in Britain under its original title, "Nanny McPhee and the Big Bang") was a fine fat hit in the U.K., and it is rife with frantic incident. We are back in rural England. There's a war on — World War II, based on the clothes and cars and air raid wardens — and the farm belonging to the beleaguered Green family is teetering on the brink. Dad (Ewan McGregor) is off fighting and Uncle Phil (Rhys Ifans, exhausting in an unfunny role) wants control of things to settle his gambling debts.

No strangers to pig excrement and hard work, the three Green children are forced to play host to their snooty London cousins who, "Narnia"-like, have been shipped from the city to the farm and who are aghast at the sheer tonnage of poo this farm generates. McPhee's supernatural presence causes all sorts of wonders en route to making a squabbling brood peaceable and whole again. Pigs do synchronized swimming routines and dash straight up trees, motorcycles fly, statues come to life.

For all that, the most interesting scene in "Nanny McPhee Returns" is a five-minute conversation between Ralph Fiennes (as the cousins' starchy father, a muckety-muck in the War Office), his son (played by Eros Vlahos) and the Green lad, Norman (Asa Butterfield). The scene takes its time. It's played for keeps. It's moving. Too much of the contrasting comedy in "Nanny McPhee Returns" is shrill, laden with routine computer-generated effects and pounded into dust by James Newton Howard's shut-up-already musical score.

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