

ENTERTAINMENT



'Spider-Man' Plays to Every Audience, Even Those Who Hate Action Movies

By SEAN SMITH

The summer blockbusters are here. Apparently nobody told Hollywood executives that the summer solstice is in June. Oh yeah, the blockbusters, poor acting, bad scripts, tons of explosions and gratuitous sex. I generally loathe the summer movie season, filled with films made for the lowest common denominator in American society that gross millions and then disappear after a week. I was equally sure that Spider-Man would be no different. Standing in line, my fears were confirmed: screaming pre-teens, teenagers and lots of guys who looked like the comic book guy on "The Simpsons," lined up and salivating over another movie about a guy in tights.

I was determined not to like this film. Action movies tend lose sight of the human story in a hail of gunfire, CGI effects and explosions, but from the opening credits to the final battle between "good and evil" these expectations were turned upside down. Tobey Maguire deserves much of the credit for humanizing this story. Perfectly cast as a smart and alienated schoolboy, Maguire brings emotional depth and a sense of humor to the role of Peter Parker. As convincing and entertaining as his nerdy math geek alter ego is, it's in Parker's reinvention of himself as Spider-Man where his acting ability shines.

When Spidey gets his super powers, Maquire takes us on an exciting journey of emotional and physical growth. Both Spider-Man and Parker want nothing more than to be understood and loved. The best part of his performance comes as we watch this teenager come out of his shell as he experiences his new-found powers with both trepidation and self-delight.

Kirsten Dunst further enhances the film with her portrayal of the "girl next door," Mary Jane. She plays this role with a sweetness and strength that makes her wholly believable. The relationship between Parker and Mary Jane is also believable. What could have quickly devolved into a predictable and simple romance a la James Cameron's "Titanic," is skillfully crafted by director Sam Raimi and leaves the audience and his characters guessing as we all experience the difficulties and heartbreaks of young love.

Willem Dafoe, however, leaves much to be desired. His Green Goblin is one-dimensional and often times flat, not an easy feat for a schizophrenic character. Rather than being convincingly maniacal, Dafoe's Green Goblin is an overly bombastic and unnecessarily violent bore. Dafoe's costume is worse than his acting. The Green Goblin sports a metallic suit and flying platform that looks as if it were stolen from an episode of Sid and Marty Krofft's "Lidsville." When he makes his first appearance, I couldn't help but be reminded of the Wicked Witch of the West flying over Oz (I'm pretty sure I chuckled out loud).

The surprise of the film comes not in its climactic battle scene but in the all-too-brief appearance of J.K. Simmons' J. Jonah Jameson. Simmons plays Jameson with splendid cartoon style, adding a touch of needed humor to the middle of the film.

Maybe this was Simmons' 15 minutes of fame, but I personally would like to have seen more of him.

The final battle scene, though somewhat exciting, felt forced, typical and needlessly violent.

But more troublesome than the violence and predictability was the fact that the destruction was once again aimed at landmark New York structures.

Even for me an ultra-cynic, seeing Manhattan in flames evoked feelings of sadness and hurt.

The cynic in me quickly returned, however, when the citizens of New York, in a scene which felt very last-minute, began pummeling the Green Goblin with bricks garbage and insults.

Here Raimi insults his audience and New Yorkers in a scene that can only be described as post-9/11 cheerleading. That said, the first three quarters of the film more than make up for the dubious and lackluster ending.

One final note: why is it that all superheroes from Superman, Batman, and now Spider-Man, can hide their true identity behind glasses, cowls and masks. Can't their friends and family recognize their voices?

MOVIE REVIEW: He Said/He Said

'Spider-Man' Flick Sets High Standard for This Year's Summer Blockbusters

By PETE BROOKS

Note: The idea of this column was supposed to be that Sean (see column to the left) would nitpick apart the fun movies and I'd whine and wheedle about the boring ones. But right off the bat, our very first flick is a fun movie that we both loved. Even in agreeing with me, Sean has found a way to ruin the movie for me. Here's hoping he's openly scornful of "Star Wars, Episode Two."

Pinch me, I must be dreamin'.

Not only did Hollywood make a near-perfect superhero picture, but they did it with one of the least-likely properties out there.

Spider-Man has suffered more than half a dozen previous attempts at live action/animation adaptation, all with varying degrees of lack of success.

So confidence wasn't necessarily high when word leaked out a few years ago that they were going to give it yet another try.

This time, however, they nailed it.

Working off an early treatment by "Titanic" writer/director Jim Cameron, Sam Raimi (director of "Darkman" and the "Evil Dead" series) and writer David Koepp have fashioned a summer blockbuster you don't have to be embarrassed to be caught standing in line for.

This thing is well-written, well-paced, well-acted and just polished to a shiny sheen.

Biff! Pow! Ka-pwing!

Raimi's hyperkinetic camera puts you right in the driver's seat as Spidey swoops, swings and scampers among the lovingly photographed skyscrapers of New York.

You will believe a man can jump around like a crazy person!

On a technical level, I love the way Spidey swings through the canyons of the city – kinda twisty and awkward, not all smooth and slick like in previous interpretations. In a movie positioned this prominently – the first big movie of the summer – you expect the animation to be well-executed, but this is really well thought-out, too.

That level of craft extends to the acting, as well.

"Spider-Man" is that rare superhero flick where the good guy is more interesting than the bad guy. And not because



Willem Dafoe's Green Goblin is lacking anything – he does as well as possible with the stock evil villain lines and silly armor he's given to work with.

But Tobey Maguire's Peter Parker is a revelation. All limpid doe-eyes and quirky grins, Maguire's as far above the material here as Patrick Stewart was as Jean Luc Picard for seven seasons on "Star Trek: The Next Generation."

Kirsten Dunst as Mary Jane Watson is serviceable but unspectacular in a role that seems pretty solely reactive. She does have a very nice, soaking wet kissing scene, though.

Hated the kid who played Harry, Peter's roommate. Both pretty and sensitive, he really brought out the Cro-Magnon in me.

J.K. Simmons' Jonah Jameson, on the other hand, is a standout; a throwback to an earlier era, where all movie newspaper publishers are as hard-bitten as they are fast-talking. He even has a very nice, very fleeting moment where he's ordered to reveal a source's identity and, at great personal risk, refuses to do so.

It's that kind of quality little moment that elevates this film to a higher plane, as if a little bit of thought was actually put into it; as if the filmmakers were as interested in characters and story as they were in turning a buck.

Speaking of which: If anything diminished my enjoyment of the film, it was the saturation-coverage hype juggernaut that preceded its arrival. I know it's a big part of the business and always has been, but with the infiltration of media into every waking moment of one's life these days, things just get to overload that much quicker.

I mean really, how many different brands of Spider-Man breakfast cereal does the market actually need? How many can it possibly bear?

I'm thinking maybe there needs to be a reconsideration of the same ol'-same ol' approach to marketing entertainment properties on account of the new ubiquity of media influence.

On the other hand: according to superhero-hype.com, only 727 days to go 'till "Spider-Man 2" – I can't wait!