'Avengers' assemble perfectly

Posted on May 09, Posted by Patrick Hall Category At the Movies - Patrick Hall

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I had to see “Marvel’s The Avengers” twice over the weekend, once to fully absorb all of its splendor and a second time trying to figure out how to objectively review what is the greatest comic book movie ever and also, the most fun I’ve had in a movie theater in years.

I’m a huge comic book nerd, so I’m not even going to pretend that I won’t slip into a bias on why “Avengers” was so good, but I’ll do my best here.

Of course, if you haven’t heard, the film puts our heroes Iron Man (**Robert Downey Jr.**), Thor (
Chris Hemsworth
), Captain America (
Chris Evans
), The Hulk (
Mark Ruffalo
), Black Widow (
Scarlett Johansson
), Hawkeye (
Jeremy Renner
) and Nick Fury (
Samuel L. Jackson
) against Thor’s conniving brother Loki (
Tom Hiddleston
).

Loki is out to obtain the “Tesseract” or “Cosmic Cube,” a source of unlimited power, and hopes to lead an army of aliens called the “Chitauri” to conquer Earth. The heroes must assemble to stop his machinations and learn to work together in the process.

The strength of “Avengers” was on the shoulders of its writer and director **Joss Whedon**, to manage the actors and top tier characters in such a way that is convincing and true to the great history they have.

Whedon succeeds with flying colors in dealing with the major characters Iron Man/Tony Stark, Thor, Captain America/Steve Rodgers and most splendidly Hulk/Bruce Banner.

The first hour of the film is dedicated to bringing our heroes together and seeing how they can coexist. Of course, Downey gives his usual great performance as Stark, bouncing quips and jokes off everyone, most notably what could be his polar opposite, Captain America.

Everyone is leery of Bruce Banner, who Ruffalo plays with such skill he always portrays a calm demeanor while also hinting at the monster within. Thor’s power and his relationship with Loki complicate the already volatile mixture.

Whedon’s writing and knowledge of the characters is the film’s most admirable quality as he is able to showcase the heroism and importance of “the big four” without relegating some to a second-tier.

The plot moves forward at all times, deliberately and with a slow pace at start, but the film’s last act is so big and intense, it almost feels like two separate films seamlessly spliced together.

Of course, the heroes disagree, from Stark’s “billionaire, playboy” attitude to Captain America’s no-nonsense, “we have orders” mindset. Thor wants Loki back at home in Asgard to face justice for his actions, while Banner just wants to be left alone.

The eventual fight between the heroes is obvious but achieved organically and convincingly enough. Of course, who can complain watching Thor and Iron Man go to blows, or Thor and Hulk going toe-to-toe?

If Ruffalo's Hulk was the star of the show, I felt Captain America had to be the second star, whose man-out-of-time dynamic worked so well, Evans actually felt more convincing in "Avengers" than his solo film.

Johansson's Black Widow, or Natasha Romanoff, is given more characterization and emotional weight than she could have ever received in her previous appearance in "Iron Man 2" and Whedon is known for his strong female characters.

Whether Black Widow receives her own solo film is debatable, but it is clear Whedon plans for the character to not just be a non-super powered bystander. On the other hand, Hawkeye, or Clint Barton, is mostly relegated to a stereotype for much of the film, and when the fists (or arrows) start flying, we see his true skill, but still not enough of his character.

Whedon and Marvel should spend more time developing Hawkeye in the eventual sequel or other films if audiences are to continue seeing him play a major role.

Hiddleston is once again fantastic as the conniving, scheming and deceptive villain Loki, who is out for revenge against his brother, still trying to step out of Thor's shadow, but also seems somewhat at the beck and call of a greater villain.

His schemes lead to an incredible battle between Thor and Hulk, a fantastic team-building exercise with Iron Man and Captain America, culminating in a huge battle in Manhattan.

The Chitauri's motives are unclear, if not totally absent, but they give the heroes something to punch, blow up and beautifully "smash." If Whedon's power was on display through the characters' interactions in the first half, his directorial skills come to full bloom in a non-stop, incredible action sequence.

Finally, the team comes together on screen for a shot that everyone has seen in the previews, but is no less awe inspiring and heart pounding. They relegate to soldier and natural leader Captain America, who shows off his skills and prowess even better than in his solo film.

Whedon moves the action and the camera in such a way we rarely avoid seeing more than one of the heroes battling it out with the alien menace. Of course you get your fill of explosions and destruction, but the art with which Whedon captures this action is superb.

We’re not watching incomprehensible battles between giant robots ala “Transformers” or subjected to shaky camera work that does more to frustrate an audience than pull them into the fight. The camera is smooth and the editing spectacular, barring a few exceptions.

One thing that stands out is the film’s ability to mix comedy, action and serious moments quite well. The comedic relief is handled mostly by Downey, who could use fewer jokes to avoid becoming a caricature, but is nevertheless, still funny.

Most of the comedic moments are thanks to Hulk in the final act as he rampages around but still maintains a personality akin to an excited puppy. The best audience reactions came from two moments by Hulk that are too great to give away. Whedon showed Marvel they shouldn’t abandon the character, especially with Ruffalo playing the part.

“Avengers” broke ground with the “team-up” movie concept and Marvel’s huge gamble paid off in spades. Would the movie stand up to critics as well as “The Dark Knight” did in 2008 or possibly “The Dark Knight Rises” later this year? Probably not, but the films, their goals and methods are far different.

Comparisons between “Avengers” and “The Dark Knight Rises” will never cease because they are opening in the same summer, but “Avengers” broke the mold for Marvel films. No future Marvel film, except “Avengers 2” will ever live up to its success.

It’s worth noting the film raked in a record $207 million in the U.S. in its first weekend and is up to $640 million worldwide after only 10 days.

“Avengers” was the most fun I’ve had watching a movie in a very long time and thankfully, I have enough friends and family who haven’t seen it yet to tag along for even more viewings.

I would suggest at least one viewing for everyone.

“Marvel’s The Avengers” is now playing in local theaters and is rated PG-13 with a runtime of 142 minutes.

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