'John Carter' more than an action film at its heart

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Civil War veteran and strange treasure-hunter, John Carter, is captured in Arizona by the U.S. Army, seeking his help to fight back against Apache attacks on citizens.

Carter manages to escape with troops hot on his tail before a skirmish with the Apache leads to Carter dragging a U.S. Colonel to safety in a cave where an otherworldly man wielding a strange weapon ambushes him.

Quickly, Carter kills the man, who with his dying breath, utters a phrase as Carter clutches a medallion being held by his attacker. With the last syllable, Carter suddenly wakes up on Mars.

A movie like “John Carter,” presented by Disney and directed by Andrew Stanton, can be a tough sell to audiences, if you can get them in the theater. A science fiction, fantasy film based on the story “A Princess of Mars” by Edgar Rice Burroughs, the film succeeds on many levels, despite a poor advertising campaign.

Once on Mars, known by the natives as “Barsoom,” (get ready to keep up with these odd names) Carter, played by Taylor Kitsch, discovers the planet’s weaker gravity gives him the ability to jump really far and high, as well as proportionately more strength -- luxuries the Martians do not have.

The fish-out-of-water is quickly caught up in the native war between the human-looking people of “Helium” and the bad guys from “Zodanga” with a more primitive race of green Martians on the periphery known as the “Tharks.”

Leader of the Tharks, Tars Tarkas, voiced by Willem Defoe, befriends Carter who saves the princess of Helium, Dejah Thoris, played by Lynn Collins. She slowly wears down Carter’s weariness for war and he takes up the good fight to save the people of Helium from certain destruction at the hands of Zodanga’s leader, Sab Than (Dominic West) and evil mastermind Matai Shang (Mark Strong).

If space operas or epic fantasy films aren’t your cup of tea, you might choose to avoid ‘Carter’ as it is filled with green aliens; awkward names and humans we are expected to believe are actually Martians because they’re “red.”

However, the value of “Carter” is far beyond the high-flying (or jumping) action scenes and big-budget effects, of which there is plenty. The film contains a strong and interesting narrative that caught my attention quickly and left me wondering why the advertisements didn’t show more details besides the titular hero leaping and fighting.

While Carter is welcomed into the Thark society after displaying his “powers,” he is urged by Princess Thoris to help her save the peaceful people of Helium. Carter is a weary character, often quite dreary, as he’s suffered through the Civil War and the toll it took on his family.

He’s reluctant to get caught up in fighting for a cause but eventually succumbs to the realization of what greater evil is afoot in the conflict between Helium and Zodanga and his love for Thoris.

Kitsch gives a decent performance as Carter, varying from an oddball treasure seeker, to a wealthy man, a tired veteran of war and a powerful leader. Carter’s character goes through an emotional roller coaster throughout the film, which for a movie billed as an action romp, was a welcome surprise.

The film and titular hero reach an emotional climax about three-fourths of the way when Carter

faces down an insurmountable army bearing down on innocent victims. He leaps into battle single-handedly, driven by the tragic fate of his family and the reminder that he was “too late, once” to save those he loved.

“Carter” is actually full of heart and emotion at its core, whether it’s Carter’s flashbacks to his wife and child on earth, to his growing love for Thoris or his sympathy for Thark outcast Sola, voiced by Samantha Morton.

The film is also packed with complex characters and unfortunate stereotypes, which is the case in most action films. Regrettably, bad guy Sab Than is all bad and fits the mold of bad guys wanting to rule the world. However, Shang’s group of evildoers has enough mystery to them to hold weight.

While Carter’s journey is the focus of the film, supporting character Tars Tarkas is incredibly fascinating and given genuine life and weight by Defoe in his voice acting. The relationship between Tarkas and outcast Sola, is not only a deep plot thread, but also intricate to Carter overcoming his cynicism.

Thoris is the typical princess forced to marry against her will, who is capable of handling herself in a fight and finds her love and savior in Carter.

If some of the characters sound familiar, it’s because Burroughs’ novels were a large source of inspiration for George Lucas’s “Star Wars” films as well as other science fiction pictures over the years. It’s a shame a movie as good as “Carter” could possibly leave people saying, “the princess was such a rip off of Princess Leia from Star Wars.

The film also raised eyebrows with a $250 million budget, but the scenery, characters, costumes, special effects and the fact that multiple eras of time are displayed, I’d say it was $250 million well-spent.

However, I would advise you to not give too much attention to trailers for this film as that’s my largest complaint. I will admit I had little interest in seeing “Carter” until reading the basic plot of

the novels.

The trailers bill this as a sword-swinging action film with what appears to be little substance. That could not be furthest from the truth. “Carter” is a without a doubt an action film but bolsters that action alongside a complex and suspenseful plot that sets up future sequels quite well.

The movie also accompanies the action and character interactions with honest humor that avoids anything campy or hokey. “Carter” has plenty to offer an array of audiences, but it’s just too bad Disney focused on what appeared to be a small demographic for their advertising campaign.

I’ll be checking out the series of novels, hopefully, sometime soon.

“John Carter” is playing at all local theaters, although mostly in 3D, and is rated PG-13 with a runtime of two hours, 17 minutes.

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