

Movie Review: The Incredible Hulk

Written by {ga=mitch}

Friday, June 13 2008 7:00 PM -

Just five years after the first "Incredible Hulk" film bombed, Marvel came back and re-did the film, wanting to strike quickly off the heels of "Iron Man", which was a huge success for the comic makers turned film producers. It's not a sequel. They simply acted like the first movie never happened. The second thing they did right was scoring another acting coup by bringing Edward Norton on board to play the tortured geneticist Bruce Banner. Mitch was there on opening night last night, and reviews the film for us this afternoon.



The last time a movie about a famous superhero tanked badly, it took eight years for the bad memories to be sufficiently repressed before an attempt was made to bring it back. This was the time frame between 1997's awful "Batman and Robin", and the sublime rebooting of the franchise with Christopher Nolan's "Batman Begins" in 2005.

In many ways, Ang Lee's 2003 debacle "Hulk" was not nearly the disaster as "Batman and Robin". The expectations weren't as high, therefore the fall wasn't nearly as far. But it was a blow to what had been a strong run for movies about Marvel Comics superheroes, as the movie was universally (and deservedly) panned.

So why come back after only five years and re-do it? Evidently it's because

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money talks, and now that Marvel controls their own movies, they're wanting to strike quickly. On the heels of the huge success of "Iron Man", who can blame them?

You've got to give them credit...they can learn from their mistakes. Lee's "visionary" introspective look at a character who wasn't a hero, just a reluctant monster, was about as boring of a superhero movie as you could get. Eric Bana is a very good actor, but there was only so much he could do with such mundane material. And then there was the ludicrous daddy twists with Nick Nolte, and one of the most idiotic endings I've ever seen in a film.

So how do you make a sequel to that? You don't. They've done the right thing and just simply acted like the first movie never happened. The second thing they did right was scoring another acting coup by bringing Edward Norton on board to play the tortured geneticist Bruce Banner.

The only thing I feared when I heard that this approach would be used was that we were going to have to endure another 45 minutes setting up Banner's gamma radiation testing accident that turned him into the not-so-jolly green giant. But this was brilliantly bypassed by showing the entire "how he became the Hulk" back story during the opening credits. It allowed anyone who did not know the story to get up to speed without boring the rest of us to tears.

So when the action begins, Bruce has been in hiding in for almost five years, and is now in Brazil, laying low while still trying to find a cure for his malady...along with receiving meditation training to keep him from having "an incident". As we start out, it's been 158 days since the last one.

A zen-like Bruce Banner would make for a really boring movie, so what it needs is a good villain, and who better than an evil military scientist? William Hurt isn't nearly as good in the role of General Ross as Sam Elliot from the first one, but he does have a much cheesier moustache. Ross goes about trying to track down

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Banner, using all the techniques perfected by Jack Bauer in "24";.

No older evil scientist would be complete without a ruthless henchman, so that brings in Tim Roth as Emil Blonsky, a Russian born, English raised gung-ho soldier who will stop at nothing to stop the Hulk after his first encounter does not go well.

The problem with any attempt to make a movie about the Hulk is the fact that he's a "superhero"; only in terms of having superpowers...you can't be much of a hero when you turn into a destructive, mindless, raging monster. So director Louis Leterrier ("The Transporter";) ratchets up the action, and introduces some "Beauty and the Beast"; moments with Banner as the Hulk, dealing with his long lost love, Betty Ross (Liv Tyler), in hope to cover up this deficiency.

This works somewhat, and it does allow for the final scene where Banner must become the Hulk to try to save people. Unfortunately, the CGI, while better than it was in the 2003 version, still doesn't look right. Even though the protagonists are tossing around real cars, they still look like cartoons.

The other problem is that with the limitations of the entire mythology of Big Greenie, it's going to be hard to have anything other than a weak, thin script. The entire movie is really nothing more than three different chase scenes that all end up with "Hulk Smash!";.

Norton, Roth, and Tyler actually do make it worth watching, however. Norton is such an amazing actor, that he can take any role and turn it into something interesting. While you get the angst and frustration from Banner, Norton avoids the "Woe is me!"; self pity that would be so easy to fall into. In doing so, you do feel sorry for him, especially when he realizes he cannot even make love to the woman who is obviously his soul mate, as he can't let his heart rate get too high. Once again, Norton's reactions, a combination of pain and sly laughing

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at the absurdity of it all brings out the pathos of the situation perfectly.

I have to give credit for two perfectly placed homages to the old television show. At one point when Bruce is channel surfing in Brazil, he runs across an old rerun of Bill Bixby in "The Courtship of Eddie's Father". Later, the man who played the Hulk in the series, Lou Ferrigno, gets a scene as a security guard at the college where Betty is a professor.

Those were much better than the obligatory inclusion of Marvel Comics founder Stan Lee. I know Alfred Hitchcock used to put himself briefly in most of his movies, but this bit of having Lee show up in every Marvel film is getting old.

Overall, the movie was good, but it had a lot of problems in the last 15 minutes. Problems with logic, problems with bad CGI, and the worst was the final little add-on scene where a depressed and soused Gen. Ross gets a cameo visit from a certain other superhero character in a scene that added nothing to the movie.

I have concerns that Marvel is getting just a little too full of themselves lately, and are stretching themselves way too thin...especially considering they are wanting to bring in movies about Wolverine, Nick Fury, Captain America, Thor, Ant Man (why?), The Avengers, and of course, sequels to Spider-Man, Iron Man, and the Hulk.

Going overboard almost killed the Batman franchise. Let's hope Marvel doesn't fall into the same trap. But for this movie...

My Rating: Bill Nelsen (2 ½ footballs).