

Movie Review: Superman Returns

Written by {ga=mitch}

Sunday, July 02 2006 7:00 PM -

Hailed as movie to kick off the summer blockbuster season, Swerbs Blurbs movie critic Mitch Cyrus set off to watch and review Superman Returns for us. With his usual blend of wit and wisdom, Mitch's review is a spoiler-free fun read ... that will give you a great idea whether or not you want to commit \$8 and two hours of your life to seeing this heavily hyped film at the theater.



In 1978, director Richard Donner re-invented the superhero genre with his revolutionary film, "Superman". Starring an unknown soap opera actor named Christopher Reeve, and anchored by legendary screen stars Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman, audiences bought into the tag line of "you will believe a man can fly."

28 years later, director Bryan Singer of X-Men fame has retraced Donner's steps, again plucking an actor (Brandon Routh) out of near obscurity to play the title character, and creating a movie that is both loving homage to the iconic film while still being original as well. And while the attention to detail Singer exhibits does make the movie stretch out longer than it truly needs at over two and a half hours, the final payoff can almost make you forget the lags.

From the opening credits utilizing the original John Williams score and electric blue credits flying through space, you can tell that Singer is not interested in exploding the franchise, as was done out of necessity by Christopher Nolan in

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order to save the “Batman” franchise in last year’s “Batman Begins”. No, what Singer is trying to do is to take the franchise back to its 1978 roots, and he uses not only the original music, but also archived dialog from Marlon Brando as well as memorable quotes and plot devices from the original resurrected for this film.

Sometimes this approach works. When diabolical Lex Luthor (Kevin Spacey) explains his latest evil plan to Lois Lane, he asks his moll (Parker Posey, in a brilliantly spot-on performance as the updated version of Miss Teschmacher) “what did my father always say to me?” True to form, she responds “get out?”...but they expound upon it, and when Luthor shouts “NO!”, she offers her next best guess, “you’re losing your hair”? On the other hand, when Superman rescues a falling jet liner and steps aboard, you almost groan when he regurgitates the line used on Lois Lane after he rescued her from the falling helicopter in the 1978 film about flying still is statistically the safest mode of transportation.

What this all amounts to is a movie where you spend the first quarter smiling about the subtle and not so subtle tributes to the original, and then the next quarter of the movie wondering if that is all Singer is interested in; re-telling the first story. Fortunately things pick up substantially in the last half as Singer finally ventures into relatively new territory.

As the film opens, Superman has been missing for five years. No one knows where he’s been...and for some reason, no one seems bright enough to be suspicious of the fact that Clark Kent has left on an indefinite vacation as well. One night Martha Kent hears another crashing meteorite near her Kansas farm house, and rushes out knowing that her adopted son is home. It seems astronomers discovered what they thought was a large chunk of remains of the planet Krypton, and Superman devised a spacecraft from his Fortress of Solitude crystals, and went out to investigate.

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Finding nothing of consequence on his journey, Superman is back, and still standing for “truth, justice, and all that stuff” (I honestly think Hollywood screen writers intentionally add lines like this to get extra publicity from the obligatory denouncements on Fox News). Clark Kent also has returned from his vacation in the Himalayas, and even Pulitzer winning journalists cannot put two and two together on that one. But given that said Pulitzer Prize Winning Journalist is none other than Lois Lane (Kate Bosworth), it is all part of the “willful suspension of disbelief” that we always allow Superman in that regard. Lois has grudgingly moved on, and now has a precocious young son and they live with her GQ cover-boy fiancé (James Marsden, finally recognizable now that he’s not hidden by the visor he had to wear as “Cyclops” in the X-Men movies), who is none other than the nephew of Daily Planet Editor-In-Chief Perry White (Frank Langella).

Tensions abound when Superman and Lois first meet again. She has won her Pulitzer from an op-ed piece entitled “Why the World Doesn’t Need Superman”, and she is obviously bitter about his disappearance. Superman is also stunned about how quickly she moved on, and actually breaks somewhat out of his normal Boy Scout persona to become a Super Stalker, using his x-ray vision and super hearing to spy upon the White/Lane household.

Other than that little bit of creepiness, Superman is back to his old ways, hovering far above city, listening for signs of trouble that would require his special help. Within days of his return, he is spotted around the globe apprehending criminals, catching people falling from buildings, and stopping disasters. Perry White once again wants Superman coverage 24/7 in his paper, much to the chagrin of Lois, who is trying to dig up the cause behind a massive East Coast power outage a few days before.

Of course, Lex Luthor is behind the mischief. Out of prison due to Superman not being available for testimony against him in court (I never have actually pictured Superman in court, but that would be amusing), and having swindled a rich old woman out of her millions, especially her huge yacht, Lex is once again looking for

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a way to obtain power, real estate, and revenge against his nemesis. He once again finds his way to Superman's Fortress of Solitude, and manages to steal some of the Krypton technology, and of course he later also steals some Kryptonite...because how else are we going to have any real conflict between Superman and non super powered beings if there is no Kryptonite?

Kevin Spacey's performance first struck me as a little too over the top. But as the movie progressed, I could see where his smugness mixed with insanity worked better than what we first saw with Gene Hackman. Hackman's Luthor was comedic relief only, whereas Spacey's Luthor has a true menace that is totally believable. I don't think I could have pictured Hackman stabbing Superman in the back with a shiv...but I don't doubt Spacey doing it at all.

For such young actors, Routh, 26, and Bosworth, 23, do an exception job making the characters their own. Routh could probably pass himself as Christopher Reeve's son, and masterfully handles the various roles as the not-as-perfect-as-you'd-think Superman, Clark Kent as the loving son of Martha Kent, and Clark Kent as the clumsy disguise he employs in Metropolis. The red cape he uses is a bit darker than the one worn by Reeve, and his portrayal matches it. Of course he can't be as dark and complex as Batman/Bruce Wayne, or as conflicted and complex as Spider-Man/Peter Parker, but you can see the emotions behind the façade of perfection, and it works well.

For Bosworth's Lane, she is very believable as both dogged reporter and loving mother. She obviously still loves Superman, but her love for Richard White is just as real, and Bosworth captures the internal struggle quite well. I never liked Margot Kidder's rendition of Lois Lane, always under the opinion that she felt it was a joke role, and her acting reflected it. Bosworth seems to take it just as seriously as Routh, a necessary deed if a movie about a man flying around in blue tights and a cape is to be taken seriously.

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However, as noted, the movie does drag perilously close to a halt near the mid-point, as Singer seems to be trying to do too much in both replaying scenes from the original while creating new plot devices. I could have really done without the re-creation of Superman meeting Lois on the rooftop and then flying her over Metropolis to the music of the wretched "Can You Read My Mind". At least Singer had the good taste not to have Bosworth recite the lyrics. He also needs to have his scriptwriters find some way to put a helmet on Ms. Lane's head, as she takes at least eight hard blows to it, by my best count. But then again, given that she's only knocked out once in all those hits, maybe she's a super-hero in the making as well.

But the last forty five minutes are as intense and action packed as you could want, and the final plot twists are both surprising and quite logical. Overall, Singer has crafted an excellent superhero flick, and if the cast remains intact and the writing continues to improve, then much like we saw with Singer's first two X-Men movies, a second movie should be even more enjoyable.

My rating: Frank Ryan (3 footballs).

Review Key:

Otto Graham: Over 4 Footballs. HOF quality movie

Bernie Kosar: 4 Footballs. Excellent

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Brian Sipe: 3 ½ Footballs. Very Good

Frank Ryan: 3 Footballs. Good

Bill Nelsen: 2 ½ Footballs. OK. Well worth seeing.

Kelly Holcomb: 2 Footballs. Disappointingly inconsistent but some bright spots.

Tim Couch: 1 ½ Footballs. Poor. Had potential, but lack of support led to an overall stinker.

Jeff Garcia: 1 Football. Horrible. All hype; no performance.

Mike Phipps: ½ Football. “We gave away Paul Warfield for THIS?” level of garbage.

Sperguson Wynn: No Footballs. UberSuckitude personified.