

Movie Review: 'Iron Man'

by Lee Grant

"Iron Man" is an ironclad jump-start to the summer movie season, a brainy adventure about a snarky, self-centered weapons-of-mass-destruction manufacturer (Robert Downey Jr.) who suddenly, thrillingly sees the light.

'IRON MAN' - Robert Downey Jr., as a wealthy industrialist turned superhero, streaks across the sky in the adventure film 'Iron Man.' CNS Photo courtesy of Zade Rosenthal. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) The film makes a political statement - much of the action takes place in Afghanistan - but does so in the glow of reason and conscience. It may not be Vice President Dick Cheney's favorite movie of the year, but it won't offend conservatives or liberals.

It's a picture, too, that'll satisfy comic-book freaks and superhero fans while at the same time delivering a finely crafted slice of cinema. The story is rife with tasty characters (based on the mind of now 85-year-old Stan Lee and his Marvel Comics from the '60s) and unique special effects.

Credit goes to the dynamic duo of director Jon Favreau ("Elf") and star Downey. The actor fought against wary studio execs to be cast in the title role of Tony Stark. Downey's bad-boy and substance-abuse reputation worked to fashion the character of a womanizing, hard-drinking, gambling genius (Lee based the original character on legendary aviation industrialist Howard Hughes).

Together, Favreau and Downey create an intelligent, moral tone and keep the movie centered on character as opposed to relying solely on splashy technical goodies.

For sure, the amazing suit that allows Stark to fly and become Iron Man is inspired engineering. And a dogfight pitching an airborne, out-of-control Stark against two supersonic jets is breathtaking.

But it's the man inside the suit, his enlightened view of the world, the quirky likable personality, that gives "Iron Man" its distinction. Only with a climactic good guy vs. bad guy showdown does the film slip into predictability.

The opening segment, with the genius, playboy industrialist riding in a Humvee amid a dangerous war zone, cocktail in one hand, exchanging small talk with the troops, is an example of powerful understatement.

Then comes a rebel attack in which Stark is seriously injured and kidnapped. It's rivetingly photographed - including an unnerving scene of water torture - by cinematographer Matthew Libatique, the man who shot Denzel Washington's "Inside Man."

In a dank cell with another captured scientist (Shaun Toub, wearing a tie and vest, inexplicably), Stark's life is saved by the insertion of a glowing, electro-magnet in his chest that keeps shrapnel from creeping to the heart and killing him. Stark is forced by his captors to build a state-of-the-art, missilelike weapon called Jericho, which he planned on selling them in the first place.

The cellmates, instead, conspire secretly to construct a flying suit. It works. Back home (an expansive, seaside, Malibu, Calif. mansion), he shuts down his deadly weapons business.

Enter Jeff Bridges, meaty and menacing as Obadiah Stane, partner of Stark's late father, who's only after profits. There's also Gwyneth Paltrow as Pepper Potts, Starks' secretary who has a deep crush on him. It's one of her most likable roles.

When it ended, you wanted Favreau and Downey to emerge for a bow, the iron men of "Iron Man."

"Iron Man." Running time: 2 hours, 6 minutes. Rated: PG-13. 3 1/2 stars.

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