

Movie Review: 'Watchmen,' a superpowered book, gets mugged on its way to the big screen

by Lee Grant

"Watchmen" takes a remarkable piece of literature, an assemblage of comic books transitioned into a mind-blowing graphic novel that considers sober human issues, and turns into a distended botch of a movie.

RATINGS GUIDE:

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) This "Watchmen," from director Zack Snyder (the box-office behemoth "300"), is tough to watch.

Alan Moore, the book's masterly writer, divorced himself early on from the Hollywood project, mortified with what the studios did to his "V for Vendetta," "From Hell" and "The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen."

The profound and eerie work on the printed page, illustrated dazzlingly by Dave Gibbons, who does get screen credit, should've been left alone in its Talmudic reverence.

What was powerful in the book is cheesy in the movie (like the Antarctica lair of Matthew Goode's Ozymandias). There are unintended laughs (mostly at the expense of Malin Akerman's Silk Spectre II and her cheap frock). The sets look expensive (filmed in Vancouver, B.C., the movie cost \$120 million), but don't resonate place or time. Mars, a crucial element of the complex storytelling, is, well, from Mars.

The story is set in the mid-1980s in the shadow of the Cold War, the planet facing annihilation, a Doomsday Clock ticking. A crew of former superheroes, regular folks who dressed in costume and fought New York City crime, are resurrected when one of their own, the surly Comedian, is murdered.

He's played with brutal bearing by Jeffrey Dean Morgan (doomed Denny from "Grey's Anatomy"). In a hyper-stylized fight sequence reminiscent of a mixed martial arts match primed with special effects, he's tossed out the window of his high-rise New York City apartment. The broken and bloody body is leeringly photographed, obviously what turns Snyder on.

The movie is rated "R" for "strong graphic violence, sexuality, nudity and language." The mayhem includes limb severing, head splitting (by hatchet), death by immolation and a young girl's remains chewed on by snarling dogs.

The nudity includes full frontal exhibited throughout by blue-hued Billy Crudup as Dr. Manhattan — he of the blank, white eyes and ripped torso (hello, "300"!), the lone former superhero with real superhero abilities.

The rest of the cast is a mixed bag. Most vivid is Jackie Earle Haley as the mask-of-shifting-inkblots Rorschach, who finds no middle ground between right and wrong and has a nasty thing for "all those intellectuals, liberals and smooth talkers."

In a prison sequence, with inmates he apprehended flailing to get at him, Haley's Rorschach growls, "You guys don't seem to understand. I'm not locked in here with you. You're locked in here with me." Its climax is gratuitously, savagely gruesome.

Also fine is Carla Gugino as Silk Spectre, at 67 living in the Happy Retreat senior citizens community. When she says, "Every day the future looks a little bit darker but the past, even the grimy parts, keeps getting better," it's touching, a rare Snyder moment of humanness.

Patrick Wilson as Dan Dreiberger (aka Nite Owl II) is startling in his paunchiness and impotence. His cure for bedroom fatigue: Whip out those superhero getups (to the tune of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah," one in a series of inappropriate song choices).

Meanwhile, Akerman's so gross in Ben Stiller's "The Heartbreak Kid" is embarrassing as Silk Spectre II, an actress unable to display emotion realistically, her voice grating, dialogue read flatly, as if from cue cards.

For those who haven't engulfed the cherished book, director Snyder makes an attempt at catching you up before the opening credits, setting the Cold War time frame, introducing characters to the accompaniment of Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are a-Changin'" (predictable song choice). President Nixon (in his fifth term), and a crew of hawkish military men are debating whether superpowered Dr. Manhattan can save the world.

There are powerful threads to the story's the reality of the American Dream, the perpetual strife among nations, the nature of human nature. Crudup's Dr. Manhattan, for one, flees to Mars. "I'm tired of these people," he says.

"Watchmen," the novel, is magnificent. "Watchmen," the movie, fat and often incomprehensible, isn't.

Alan Moore was right in detaching himself from the project, maintaining his integrity.

"Watchmen." Rated: R. Running time: 2 hours, 41 minutes. 2 stars.

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