

The Screen Savor: Mutation Sensation

by Kimberly_Gadette

A mutant matinee! Starring "X"-treme, altered egos of derring-do â€¦ but with much more BANG! for that proverbial buck than "X"-pected. Not just on screen, but the filmmaking team of superheros have driven this film to "X"-hilarating heights. Only superheros could move the action along at a breathtaking pace, keeping the audience riveted in suspense, unsure of any predictable outcome. Only superheros could throw around such weighty themes as absolute power, homophobia and forced genetic manipulation as easily as Sir Ian McKellen's Magneto tosses 18-wheelers out of his path. Only superheros could effortlessly pick up the thread of the last "X2: X-Men United," so that any new viewer coming in fresh to this sequel wouldn't be helplessly lost. And only superheros, in the name of director Brett Ratner ("Rush Hour" "Red Dragon") and writers Simon Kinberg and Zak Penn, helming a marvelous cast, could make this movie so, well, so ... super.

In this third chapter of "The X-Men," those cowardly homosapiens are ganging up on the mutants again, this time with a "cure" that will strip the super-dupers of all that makes them super, transforming them into hum-drum humans. While Charles Xavier (Patrick Stewart) welcomes the idea that perhaps for some mutants, the choice could be peacefully considered, militant Magneto rallies his forces to fight against the proponents of the cure, no matter how much bloodshed may result.

Stepping in as the new director a frightening eight weeks before production, Brett Ratner not just did it, but outdid it. His action scenes are tighter, the pace faster, the drama more intense than in the two previous pictures. Writers Kinberg and Penn have balanced their theme-heavy screenplay with characters that are finally, thankfully more flesh and blood than their earlier renderings. Allowed to portray more than a cloud cover with cataracts, Halle Berry finally gets to grow a spine â€¦ and she didn't even have to rely on genetic

trickery to do so.

The earlier camaraderie between McKellen's Magneto and Patrick Stewart's Charles Xavier is explored with more depth, and watching those two Shakespearean pros of the British theater joust with each other is a great delight. There's a new addition to the cast with an unrecognizable Kelsey Grammer playing Hank McCoy/Beast (think Chewbacca, marinated in a vat of steroidal blueberries, studying advanced diction from Henry Higgins—and that's Beast.) In a well-directed bit, Ratner allows Beast the time to consider his own possible transformation to human form, with a single-camera hold on Beast staring at his suddenly-human hand, beige, hairless, unexceptional. In that quiet moment, Beast's yearning for the "normal" life unlived comes across as loud as any apocalyptic meltdown. Perhaps even louder.

Hugh Jackman as Wolverine continues to bring his rebellious, James Dean-esque protagonist to life. We see his pain, humor and yearning, sometimes in a single glance. As the Phoenix rising from (while creating mountains of her own) ashes, Famke Janssen's Jean Grey is reborn as a schizoid Goddess. Like the sweet, beautiful girl one marries morphing into the vengeful ex-wife from hell, I wondered if Jean Grey's/Phoenix' original creators, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, had called on their own romantic entanglements to devise this she-devil who originally debuted in 1963. No matter—Janssen is a consummate actress who deftly reflects the character's torment, even when her darker side is calling the fatal shots.

For pyrotechnics, oh my, these Hollywood techno-wizards keep getting better and better. Instead of having to apply bootblack hair dye and rosy-cheeked prosthetics, McKellen and Stewart were "youthened" 25 years through new movie magic. The scenes of destruction are jaw-droppingly fantastic, including a re-working of the Golden Gate Bridge that is worth the price of admission.

"The Last Stand" is not just entertaining matinee fare: It holds a mirror to societies' ills, forcing us to think and rethink our deepest prejudices. Whether we wrestle with nuclear irresponsibility, immigration, foreign civil wars, anti-gay marriage or racial bigotry, the idea that one race/religion/political ideology should take it upon itself to "cure" others is more than mere fiction. Look at a newspaper, listen to the radio, glance at the evening news—this barrage of demagoguery is feeding into your mind over matter each and every day. If nothing else, this movie, this "Last Stand" might make us all take a new look at our very own, very personal stands.

Grading this movie on the curve of the Deschutes River: A-
Production Credits:

"X-Men: The Last Stand" . Cast and creators: Hugh Jackman, Halle Berry, Ian McKellen, Patrick Stewart, Famke Janssen, Kelsey Grammer, Anna Paquin, Rebecca Romijn. Directed by Brett Ratner. Written by Simon Kinberg, Zak Penn. Rated: PG-13. Running Time: 104 minutes
Photo credit: Copley News

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