

Movie Review: 'Spider-Man 3'

by David_Elliott

By the Big Three "event" criteria, "Spider-Man 3" qualifies:

- 1) It cost a lot;
- 2) It will earn a lot;
- 3) Hype matches 1 and 2.

'SPIDER-MAN 3' - Kirsten Dunst returns as Mary Jane Watson and Tobey Maguire as Spider-Man star in the action movie 'Spider-Man 3.' CNS Photo courtesy of Peter Lovino. Such movies arrive with distortion factors. People may get their hopes and responses so jiggered by those inflation factors that determining just how well the movie works gets dazed by all the dazzle. There was the sort of viewer who loved "Titanic" just because it was so big, and the kind who hated it for the same reason (and may their icebergs never collide).

You can skip all the merchandising and avoid saying "Spidey" but still have a good time with "Spider-Man 3." It's a dynamic Spider-Man movie. Most of the familiars are back, the additions work well enough, the movie often looks terrific and excess length (about 15 minutes) is just the pad built into these piled-up projects.

The first sequel (2004) was harried by the "can we do it again?" syndrome, though it had classy villains (Alfred Molina, Willem Dafoe, together a hambone duet of orchestral size). Now relaxed into its highly costumed skin, the new epic lets James Franco as Harry, the gone Dafoe's son, cut loose for some embittered villainy a lot like crazy old dad's.

And Thomas Hayden Church, who looks more like Dafoe than Franco does, rips around as another villain. The story's "heart" includes making Church a sorrowful thief, Flint Marko, who misses his dear, sickly daughter. "I'm not a bad person, I've just had bad luck," Marko mutters sadly, and to prove it he stumbles into a secretive physics lab and is disintegrated into a weirdly buff pile of sand.

"De-molecularized" and then re-formed as Sandman, he is the most beautiful effect this series has achieved. He sweeps around Manhattan like a granular Golem, swarming over Spider-Man and hurling sand in his eyes. If "Dune" had included Sandman, it might not have flopped.

Tobey Maguire remains likably dorky as Peter Parker, although his friend, then rival, then friend again (during amnesia), Harry knows he is S-man. So does girlfriend Mary Jane, "MJ," played by Kirsten Dunst as a rising show canary with a sweetly retro voice aching for Broadway.

Dunst is funst, a real sparkle-puss. But it takes shy Peter forever to ask for marriage, and so Harry makes a move on MJ. Such twists are what the writers consider development. When they crank up a jazz club dance for Peter, who turns villainous whenever creepy tendrils of black goo take over his body, it echoes the pretended depth of old musicals.

Dunst, Maguire and Franco are demographically correct, lasered right into the youth market. Each is a teenager's idea of stellar charisma, with fresh features reaching for puppy adulthood. It's as if Andy Hardy and Betsy Booth had grown up (but not much) and taken over the movies.

The appeal goes well beyond the plot doodles, or even the gorgeous use of the skyline and the tremendously engineered effects. It's rooted less in the Marvel Comics source than in director Sam Raimi's fierce faith in that source as a field of imaginative play, building upon the comics, freshly expanding the ka-pow! of the paper originals.

When S-man turns aerial, we soar along. When he falls, stuck to a blasted slab of wall, gravity grabs us by the throat. But Raimi balances the key elements shrewdly, making sure that masculine action blasts alternate neatly with chick-flavored emotional scenes.

RATINGS4 STARS - Excellent.3 STARS - Worthy.2 STARS - Mixed.1 STAR - Poor.0 - Forget It (a dog) "S-M 3" is never pompous, its spurts of humor including Bruce Campbell as a French maitre d'. And when MJ gets a bad review, adoring Peter calms her with "That's a critic," as if snubbing fungus. This critic, for one, laughed.

A Columbia/Sony Pictures release. Director: Sam Raimi. Writers: Ivan Raimi, Alvin Sargent. Cast: Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, James Franco, Thomas Hayden Church, Topher Grace, Bryce Dallas Howard. Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes. Rated PG-13. 3 stars.

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