

DVD Select: No. 4's not so Fantastic

by Robert_J_Hawkins

Wow. I never thought I'd say that a movie was just like a comic book - and consider that a negative.

Well, there's a first for everything, right?

'4: RISE OF THE SILVER SURFER' - The Fantastic Four battle an emotionally conflicted alien for the future of Earth in '4: Rise of the Silver Surfer.' CNS Photo courtesy of Diyah Pera. DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin Here goes: "4: Rise of the Silver Surfer" (Fox, 1 1/2 stars) is hardly better than a comic book. Yeah, I know "Fantastic Four" is a comic book. I read them, too, as a kid. It's just that when a comic book makes it up to movie status, I expect the experience to be a bit more than flipping pages and ogling Sue Storm's impossibly beautiful contours.

So, here we get to ogle Jessica Alba's impossibly beautiful body but I don't think that's an advancement up the food chain.

The problem here is that every frame feels like a comic book frame and every actor sounds like they are reading voice balloons off the pages. But most egregious - all laws of physics are suspended. Characters fly at the speed of light in convertible rockets with nary a hair mussed. Stuff crashes into crowded streets and nobody gets crushed. There's even an epic battle that takes place in a little town I like to call "Las Vegacagoyorkondonapore." Either that or Las Vegas now has an incredibly deep river and dense high-rise towers above its Chinatown.

"4: Rise of the Silver Surfer" is just too self-consciously aware that it is comic book. There's no flow, just setups and executions. I mean, pretty sad when the coolest, most-believable character is a chrome hood ornament called the Silver Surfer (Doug Jones).

The Silver Surfer is an emotionally conflicted alien advance-man for this overgrown Hoover called Galactus. Here's the weird thing: As massive a force as Galactus is, he (or she or it) apparently can't dig his own holes on the planets he sucks dry for their energy content. That's the Silver Surfer's job: Drilling suck holes for Galactus. Yeah, he's the sidekick from hell.

Meanwhile, rubber band boy Reed Richards (Ioan Gruffudd) and Sue Storm (Alba) are planning their wedding - again. While the combustion-brained Johnny Storm (Chris Evans) shills for advertisers like a NASCAR driver and the hulking Ben Grimm (Michael Chiklis) runs around grunting.

OK, OK. Delay the wedding and save the world. They're not dummies. But the Fantastic 4 also have to deal with the return of the evil Victor Von Doom (Julian McMahon) and an unfortunately arrogant and narrow-minded Army Gen. Hager (Andre Braugher). You never want a general at war to be his own worst enemy.

The whole thing hits a low point when Gen. Hager brings in a sinister interrogation team - yeah, they wear black - to the secret prison to which Silver Surfer has been renditioned. You almost expect to see hooded Iraqi terrorists standing on milk cartons in the corner. Geeze, guys, you're a comic book. Save the political commentary for less-cartoonish types, like Michael Moore.

Another low point? The Fantastic 4 struggling to save that massive eyesore of a Ferris wheel, the London Eye which the Silver Surfer had the good taste to nearly upend.

High points? Stan Lee getting turned away from the wedding because he isn't on the guest list. The only irony in a most un-ironic movie. And flambeau-boy Johnny Storm looking mournfully at his tuxedo and muttering in protest "This is Dolce!" before lighting up as the Human Torch.

Mostly though, the movie is collection of been-there special effects, wooden acting and trite set ups (Pachelbel's Canon in D major for the wedding? Please!)

Please, no more.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Jindabyne" (Sony, 2 1/2 stars) Gritty drama based on a Raymond Carver short story but set in Australia. A group of men on a weekend fishing trip discover the body of a murdered girl in the river. Rather than cut short their trip, they wait until their return to report the gruesome situation to authorities. The apparent callousness of the men, her husband Stewart (Gabriel Byrne) in particular, unsettles one wife, Claire (Laura Linney). An already strained marriage fractures as Claire presses for answers and a resolution. The movie moves at languid pace but solid performances bring in the heat.

"1408" (Genius, 3 stars) You can check into Room 1408 at the Dolphin Hotel but ... well, you're on your own, my friend. But, you are not alone ... In this very cool adaptation of a Stephen King short story, John Cusack is author Mike Enslin a debunker of the paranormal who checks into Room 1408, despite the warnings

of the hotel manager (Samuel L. Jackson) and comes face to face with unimaginable horrors. Enslin finds some great material to write about, if he can only live long enough to check out.

"Day Night Day Night" (Genius Products, 2 1/2 stars) A 19-year-old girl of vague origins becomes a suicide bomber, intent on her target: Times Square. Her two days and nights of preparation are nerve-wracking and so frustrating. Why? Give us answers with the horror.

"Docurama Film Festival IV" (Docurama.com) The slate of 10 prestigious documentaries that become available starting Oct. 2 start with "Plagues & Pleasures on the Salton Sea" a quirky exploration of the massive inland body of stagnating water in Southern California. Another winner "I Like Killing Flies" about iconoclastic Greenwich Village restaurateur Kenny Shopsin. See the whole list at www.docurama.com.

IT CAME FROM TV

Season two of crime drama "Criminal Minds"; debut season of the sour "Flavor of Love" spin-out reality series "I Love New York"; season two of the sit-com "How I Met Your Mother"; the debut season of the James Wood legal drama "Shark"; premiere season of the post-apocalyptic drama "Jericho"; the intriguing first season of the family-documentary series "Little People, Big World"; and season one of the epically foul "Sarah Silverman Program."

"The War" (PBS/Paramount) Leave it to Ken Burns to tackle the big picture, one more time. The century's premiere documentarian has in the past created epic final words on jazz, baseball and the Civil War. And now, in the 15-hour "The War," Burns explores World War II. His original concept is to mine the events and people in four American towns during the war. For a while, that works but the explicating war forces Burns out of his cozy concept. The style should be familiar - illuminating video, vintage photos, time-specific music and elegant voice-overs. Is it the final word on World War II? Doubtful. But if I had to choose between the thoughtful and respectful Burns and the ditzy cheerleader Tom Brokaw, I'll take my war from Burns every time.

FROM THE VAULTS

"Caligula" (Image, 1976) Popular legend has it that Gore Vidal wrote a heck of a script and Tinto Brass directed the same but it took moneyman and producer Bob Guccione to wrest the project way and turn it into the mind-bogglingly bad piece of porn that we cherish today as a pop cultural cinematic disaster. (Yes, he did shoot extra footage with his Penthouse vixens.) The corruption and decadence of power were the themes - oh, yes, in the movie, too, which was set in ancient Rome. It helped popularize toga parties in fraternity houses, too. The new "Three-Disc Imperial Edition" includes the original unrated theatrical release and an alternate pre-release cut. "Caligula" stars Malcolm McDowell and Helen Mirren provide a spicy commentary track. And Tinto Brass is interviewed, among other juicy features.

"Jonathan Livingston Seagull" (Paramount, 1973) The truth is, and I know what guys told you, but no guy willingly saw this movie - and we no more understood it than the phrase "Being in love means never having to say you're sorry." The seagull is different and the elders boot him out - what was he, James Dean reincarnated?

More great stuff:

- A 50th anniversary edition of the creepily sweet Cinderella romance "Funny Face," starring Audrey Hepburn as a young mousey bookworm turned supermodel and Fred Astaire as her photographer/love interest, albeit old enough to be her grandfather.

- A 40th anniversary two-disc edition of the Disney animated feature "The Jungle Book."

- The scary movie that put the fan in fanatical and won Kathy Bates an Oscar, "Misery" (1990).

- Back when horror movies had a decent reputation Francis Ford Coppola made one even better, with romance, too: "Bram Stoker's Dracula" (1992).

- The ultimate dating nightmare - my girlfriend is a murderous alien. Yup, the original "Species" (1995) is back with Natasha Henstridge and Michelle Williams as Sil and young Sil, respectively; with Marg Helgenberger, Ben Kinsley and Forest Whitaker.

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