Iron Man

Talent: Robert Downey Jr., Jeff Bridges, Gwynneth Paltrow, Terrence Howard, Faran Tahir, Jon Favreau.

Date of review: Thursday 1st May, 2008

Director: Jon Favreau
Duration: 126 minutes
Classification: M
We rate it: Three and a half stars.

As is the Hollywood pattern nowadays (and as I often note as we head into our Southern-hemisphere Winter) this is the time of the year in which the American Summer Blockbusters hit our screens. First off the rank this season is Iron Man, a Marvel comic-books adaptation, starring (of all people) Robert Downey Jr. in the title role. Well, he sort-of plays the title role, in the sense that his character’s real name is Tony Stark, and the “Iron Man” of the title is actually Stark plus an enormous mechanised weapon-suit he wears, which both protects his real identity from the public gaze and allows him to fly, jump, smash his way through tall buildings at a single swipe and generally act like a high-tech superhero. If this sounds like your cup of tea, you’ll have a great time with this highly polished, explosive and wildly entertaining film.

Downey Jr.’s skills as an actor (particularly as an actor with superb comic timing) are, in my opinion, unimpeachable. I think he’s one of today’s finest Hollywood inhabitants, and his infamously fast-living past involving dependencies on drugs and alcohol and stays in rehab seems, amazingly, to have done nothing to diminish his power as a screen star. It seems he’s off the booze and drugs now (in a touching recent anecdote, his co-star in the hilarious Kiss Kiss Bang Bang, Val Kilmer, refrained from drinking alcohol during the shooting of that film as a mark of respect to the now-sober Downey Jr.), and Robert has now made the move into leading role in a mega-budget science-fiction superhero film. Iron Man has quite obviously been propped-up with an enormous budget (my guess is that it would have nudged the US $200 million mark) and as a CGI-heavy action film, it delivers gloriously entertaining carnage and enjoyable laughs from beginning to end.

The story starts in the Middle-East, where millionaire arms designer Tony Stark is touring with an American Army escort, to whom he demonstrates the latest mega-destructive missile his company has conceived and produced. The display of awesome destructive power is somewhat breezily delivered by Stark, who seems every inch the
bored rich-boy, gifted with remarkable scientific and design abilities but lacking a
certain moral sense. He’s happy for his company to keep making megabucks by
selling arms to the highest bidders (as is his second-in-command, a nearly
unrecognisable bald and bearded Jeff Bridges) but he doesn’t want to trouble himself
by thinking too deeply about the destruction his products cause. Once he demonstrates
his latest plaything in the desert, a mishap occurs, he’s captured by the enemy, and in
order to escape and save himself, he sets about building an ingenious powered suit, a
kind of ultra-sophisticated piece of computerised body-armour, and it’s there that
Stark’s second life as a super-hero begins.

His escape, spectacular as it proves to be, is only the beginning of his new life as a
changed man. He returns to the US and begins refining his creation, polishing its
construction and enhancing its super-computerised control and weapons systems, and
sets about using the suit in the service of good. It’s only a matter of time before both
the military and the bad guys smell a rat, and pretty soon everyone (including the
suspiciously cagey Bridges) wants to know what Stark is up to.

Iron Man delivers large-scale action scenes and hilarious one-liners and gag
sequences in almost equal measure; Downey Jr. makes both elements of the film work
well because of his leading-man star presence and his aforementioned glorious comic
timing. Gwyneth Paltrow, Terrence Howard and Jeff Bridges provide very able
support in their various roles, and the computer wizards who make the digital effects
that comprise much of the film’s running time have again outdone themselves – the
film looks truly extraordinary, and the action scenes really are dazzling. This is
Hollywood fodder at its most expensive and well-produced, and if the conclusion and
let’s-leave-things-open-for-a-sequel setup come off as somewhat disappointing, it’s
forgivable after having had such a fun ride. Iron Man is great holiday popcorn-
crunching entertainment, and who can get enough of that?

Nick Prescott