Superman Returns

Talent: Brandon Routh, Kevin Spacey, Frank Langella, Kate Bosworth, Parker Posey, James Marsden.

Writer/director/editor: Bryan Singer
Classification: M (Mature)
Duration: 154 minutes
We rate it: Two stars.

Date of review: 29th June, 2006.

Like many filmgoers around my age, I remember going to the cinema as a young boy to see Christopher Reeve play the man of steel in the “old” Superman films. The 1978 version of Superman, directed by Richard Donner, was a colossal hit and made a career for the then unknown Reeve; Gene Hackman and Terence Stamp were great value as the villains, and the effects were, for the time, eye-popping. Coming in the wave of blockbusters that arrived during the late 1970s, Superman began a very successful franchise; by the time the series ended in 1987 (with Superman IV: The Quest for Peace) Reeve had earned a packet and had become synonymous with the mild-mannered superhero.

Since then, of course, Reeve has sadly shuffled off this mortal coil, and the effort to resurrect the franchise has been passed on to a new generation. Enter wunderkind Hollywood director Bryan Singer (the young man responsible for The Usual Suspects and the first two X-Men films) and a team of special effects technicians qualified to turn a mega budget into two-plus hours of digital mayhem. Somewhere in this effort, sadly, a sense of anything resembling well-paced and coherent storytelling has been lost.

We all know what to expect with a superhero story. The world will be put in peril, the superhero will suffer some kind of crisis of confidence, but the nastiness of the villain will finally force the superhero’s hand and the cause will be taken up and decency will prevail. Oh, and there will be some spectacular fights and explosions. There’s nothing inherently wrong with this formula, mind you, but the fact is that it is indeed a formula, and because audiences understand it so completely, it will take either a very surprising twist on that formula or an extraordinarily exciting reaffirmation of it to raise the slightest eyebrow among audience members. Unfortunately, Superman Returns offers neither of these options.

Brandon Routh, an unknown actor who indeed bears a striking physical resemblance to the young Christopher Reeve, actually does a very good job as the man of steel.
While he struggles with the script’s uncomfortable stabs at pseudo-comedy, he certainly looks the part, and manages to convey the requisite sense of semi-reluctant heroism. The rest of the casting is markedly less successful; this is indeed strange, given that most of the supporting actors possess enviable CVs. The villain, Lex Luthor, is played by Kevin Spacey, who seems to have walked onto the set with the intention of not just chewing it thoroughly but spitting it out all over the other actors; his performance is so over the top that it looks like it has been shot for a different film altogether. Then there’s the decidedly un-charismatic Kate Bosworth as Lois Lane; believe me, if this character represents the future face of feature journalism, our print media is in a lot more trouble than one might think. Finally, the wonderful Frank Langella has been relegated to a tiny supporting role, mouthing the most vacuous dialogue one could possibly imagine, and glaring at the reporters. When an actor of Langella’s talents is playing third banana, something has gone wrong at drawing-board stage.

Clearly I wasn’t terribly impressed by Superman Returns. The special effects are often eye-popping, and the sound is spectacular, and every little boy has always wanted to be able to fly and stop bullets and win the girl, but all of this fantastical stuff has to be presented with some kind of unusual or intoxicating spin in order for it to be anything other than tired and uninteresting. Here, though, Singer has paced his film in slow-motion for much of its exhaustive running-time, and while some of the digital set pieces were impressive, they weren’t intoxicating enough to make one forget the gaping story holes or the jarring inconsistencies in tone. Superman has returned, but I hope that if he sticks around he’ll offer something a lot more interesting next time.

Nick Prescott.