X-Men: The Last Stand


Writer/director/editor: Brett Ratner
Classification: M (Mature)
Duration: 104 minutes
We rate it: Three stars.

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In short, the third film in the X-Men franchise is much like the second one: spectacular, fast-moving, and in large part consisting of a lot of sound and fury that signifies not terribly much. It’s massively entertaining, mind you; just don’t come looking for profound, life-changing narrative.

Like many audience-members, I enjoyed the first X-Men film immensely. Bryan Singer’s big-budget special-effects epic was one of the highlights of 2000; an intelligent and slickly made box-office juggernaut that still managed to make its audiences think. Based on a very successful Marvel comic-book franchise, X-Men followed a group of characters endowed with extraordinary powers that, instead of being supernatural, were the results of human evolution: mutations. The first film’s action/adventure plot made much of its subtexts, as well: the whole premise could be read as a treatise on youthful alienation (the “mutation” idea being a metaphor about adolescence and puberty), while racism and other forms of intolerance were examined through the depictions of vulgar, reactionary responses with which many of the film’s “normal” characters greeted the mutants. Such material was indeed interesting, and the result on the big screen was undeniably spectacular. Singer regrouped his cast for the 2003 sequel, which represented a step up with regard to its astonishing digital effects, but was something of a step down with regard to its plot.

Here, in X-Men: The Last Stand (with Rush Hour’s Brett Ratner now directing) we have a film that struggles to overcome the expectations that surround it. With a mind-boggling budget at his disposal, Ratner pulls out all the stops to give us spectacle piled on action topped off with spectacle. The whole thing is propelled at a truly breakneck pace, and with cutting-edge digital effects giving the enormous set-pieces eye-popping polish, and the DTS soundtrack enveloping us in viscera-rattling surround, the plot really does take a far back seat.
Such as it is, the story concerns the fact that the government in this near-future society has manufactured a “cure” for mutancy. The characters endowed with (or afflicted by, depending upon which side one takes) mutations are thus able to choose to become “normal” humans if they wish; the danger, of course, is that the government might choose to outlaw mutants, in which case the “cure” will be forcibly administered. Thus the wonderfully malevolent Magneto (played by the scenery-chomping McKellen) decides to amass an army of mutants to confront the government, storm the research facility and destroy the cure. The scene is set.

Ratner, whose Rush Hour films were loud, silly fun, brings the same kind of populist eye to X-Men: The Last Stand – “Don’t let your philosophising get in the way of a decent fight scene,” Ratner seems to think. It must be said that the film’s scenes of mayhem are pretty staggering, and the climactic confrontation to which we build up throughout the second hour is eye-popping stuff, with San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge ripped off its foundations and thrown about (WWF-wrestler-style) by McKellen. Jackman, reprising his role as Wolverine, is again amusing as the gruff, cigar-chomping tough guy, though the lovely Anna Paquin takes a back seat as her character Rogue is sidelined amid all the fighting and explosions.

X-Men: The Last Stand is fun for much of its running time, and its special effects are indeed astonishing. If you love this kind of thing, you’ll get every kind of bang for your buck; if you wanted more of the intrigue, metaphor and pop-culture moral conundrums, maybe you should hire the first one and give it another look.

Nick Prescott.