The Hulk


Date of review: Thursday 12th June, 2008

Director: Louis Leterrier
Duration: 112 minutes
Classification: M
We rate it: 3 and a half stars.

In 2003, Taiwanese director Ang Lee (of all people) made a new entry into the comic-book filmmaking franchise with his version of the angry green fellow, the Incredible Hulk. Lee, at that time most famous for his intimate family dramas, and a few years later to make a huge splash with Brokeback Mountain, seemed the oddest choice of director to be matched with such a project, and in my opinion the 2003 film really didn't work. Eric Bana seemed miscast as Bruce Banner/The Hulk, and Jennifer Connelly struggled somewhat amidst all the CGI crash-and-bang. Despite one or two engaging action set-pieces, much of Lee's version seemed just plain silly to me, and to many other critics besides.

This time around (and perhaps in response to the rather chilly critical reaction the 2003 version received in some parts), the producers have decided to go back to the beginning of the franchise and start the story all over again, with a new director and cast. Edward Norton makes for a far more convincing Banner, and (dare I say it) Louis Leterrier (the director of Unleashed and Transporter 2) is a far more comfortable director of this kind of big-scale film. The action pedigree the French filmmaker brings to the project is impeccable, and Norton's range as an actor makes Banner an engaging central figure. Liv Tyler (too infrequently seen of late) makes a terrific sidekick/scientist/love interest, and Tim Roth and William Hurt are nicely hissable bad-guys.

The Hulk is of course an entry in the continuing list of Marvel comic-book adaptations. The Marvel studio took control of all its character franchises recently, and now we are seeing many crossovers from one film to another, with characters and actors making cameos in each-others' films and with future superhero teamings-up in the pipeline. Here, for instance, Robert Downey Jr. (who played Iron Man so well recently) does a little walk-on near the end credits, signalling his impending presence in another of the yet-to-be-made Marvel films. The studio certainly seems to know what it's doing.

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The Hulk is of course both a metaphor for masculine aggression and a kind of modernised Jekyll and Hyde story. The story begins in the opening credits sequence as Banner, a scientist working for the good of humankind, volunteers to be the subject of one of his own experiments on cellular manipulation and bio-engineering. The experiment goes horribly wrong (do they ever go smoothly in this kind of film?) and before one can say "Big Ugly Green Guy", The Hulk is born. Once the experiment has spiralled out of control, whenever Banner gets angry, he's swiftly transformed into a towering beast of enormous strength and dimensions, and is unable, it seems, to control his destructive propensities. Banner, once he realises what has happened to him, seeks refuge away from those he loves, both to protect them and to keep himself safe from the US Army, whose representatives want to harness The Hulk’s power as a weapon of war.

Leterrier has done unusually subtle work here, in that for the first half-hour or so of screen time we don’t get any big CGI set-pieces, just character development and narrative suspense. When Banner/The Hulk is finally tracked down, the result is eye-popping, and it sets the tone for what is to follow as a gung-ho Army grunt (Tim Roth) becomes obsessed with capturing The Hulk’s essence for himself. Angry Colonel William Hurt, (who is also the father of Liv Tyler’s character, Betty Ross, Banner’s love interest) is also gunning for the big green guy, and a showdown of enormous proportions in inevitable.

As an entertaining action yarn, The Hulk is most acceptable, and though it isn’t especially memorable, it certainly out-shines the Ang Lee version. Not as raucously eye-popping as the recent Transformers, The Hulk is nonetheless good escapist fare, pulled off with panache. For diverting popcorn fun and good comic-book superhero fluff, it’s not bad at all.

Nick Prescott

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