

Avengers hits big screen with a blast

For a movie this violent, it ends up as a plea for peace

BY CHRISTY LEMIRE
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FILM REVIEW

The hype has been building for years and it couldn't possibly be more deafening at this point.

After a series of summer blockbusters that individually introduced *Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Thor* and *Captain America*, all these characters come together alongside several other friends and foes in *Marvel's The Avengers*.

And with director and co-writer Joss Whedon, they couldn't be in better hands. He's pulled off the tricky feat of juggling a large ensemble cast and giving everyone a chance to shine, of balancing splashy set pieces with substantive ideology. Stuff gets blown up real good in beautifully detailed 3-D in *The Avengers* — the area in and around Grand Central Terminal, for example, gets obliterated beyond recognition in an exhausting, climactic battle — but the film as a whole is never a mess from a narrative perspective.

Whedon keeps a tight rein on some potentially unwieldy material, and the result is a film that simultaneously should please purists (one of which he is) as well as those who aren't necessarily comic-book aficionados. He also stays true to the characters while establishing a tone that's very much his own. As he did with the recent horror hit *The Cabin in the Woods*, which he co-wrote and produced, Whedon has come up with a script that's cheeky and breezy, full of witty ban-

ter and sly pop-culture shout-outs as well as self-referential humour, one that moves with an infectious energy that (almost) makes you lose track of its two-and-a-half-hour running time.

The back-and-forth between Robert Downey Jr.'s glib Iron Man and Chris Evans' old-school Captain America is electric, while Downey's more low-key, philosophical exchanges with Mark Ruffalo's Hulk help give the film some intellectual heft. Actually, Downey damn near runs away with this whole thing, a tough feat to pull off in a cast full of personalities who are literally larger than life; it just goes to show once again how irresistibly charismatic he can be with the right kind of writing.

But the film's vibe is never smug or off-putting; these are still comic book heroes full of all the torment and introspection you'd expect. And for a movie that's violent as hell, *The Avengers* ends up being an earnest plea for peace. As in the best of its predecessors, the original *Iron Man* from 2008, it's a reminder that a summer blockbuster can be glossy and entertaining but still have meatier matters on its mind.

And we haven't even gotten to the plot yet: It's your basic bad-guy-wants-to-take-over-the-world kinda thing. But even Whedon seems to recognize what a hackneyed premise that is, so he has a little fun with it.

The preening, effete Loki (Tom Hiddleston), the bitter brother of hunky demigod Thor (Chris Hemsworth), descends to Earth



Chris Evans and Robert Downey Jr. in *The Avengers*.

from Asgard, which still has a distinctly '70s cheesiness about its twinkly sci-fi aesthetic. Once here, he steals the Tesseract, the cosmic blue cube that gives its bearer unlimited power, or some such.

The no-nonsense Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson), the head of S.H.I.E.L.D. — which had been entrusted with the safety of said cube — springs into action to reacquire it by assembling a dream team of superheroes and other sundry badasses with specialized skills. Nick gets help in this endeavour from his right-hand man, Agent Coulson (Clark Gregg, once again bringing some welcome deadpan humour to this outlandish scenario).

Besides Iron Man, Thor and Captain America, The Hulk's services are needed because the Tesseract exudes a radiation that will help track it, and The Hulk — despite

the threat of his gigantic, green volatility — knows a little something about gamma rays. (Ruffalo, stepping into the Bruce Banner role that Eric Bana and Edward Norton played previously in the past decade, brings a sense of wry bemusement and appealing self-deprecation to this dangerous and misunderstood character). There's also master assassin Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner) and super spy Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson).

But because these are superheroes with super powers, they also have super egos. And so a great deal of time is spent having them talk a lot of trash and square off against one another to prove who's toughest. There's Iron Man vs. Thor, Thor vs. The Hulk, Hawkeye vs. Black Widow and so on. While they might seem like filler, these showdowns allow each character to have his or

her time in the spotlight, and they do build genuine tension. They also happen to represent the adolescent fantasies of every geek in the audience. So in theory, everyone's happy.

Eventually they will all have to come together for one epic battle against their shared enemy in Midtown Manhattan, home of Iron Man Tony Stark's latest dazzling architectural creation, his eponymous high-rise, and a cool place in general to stage massive movie destruction.

Much of the gadgetry is cleverly detailed, as you'd expect — Tony Stark has devised stunningly efficient ways to get his metal suit on and off — but *The Avengers* is at its strongest in its quieter, simpler moments — when people are actually talking to each other.

The dialogue sparkles as brightly as the special effects; these people may be wearing ridiculous costumes but they're well fleshed-out underneath. And so in every regard, this movie truly fulfills its hype.

PRODUCTION NOTES

The Avengers. US, 2011). Written by: Zack Penn, Joss Whedon, Stan Lee, Jack Kirby. Directed by: Joss Whedon. With: Robert Downey Jr., Chris Evans, Chris Hemsworth, Don Cheadle, Jeremy Renner, Clark Gregg, Scarlett Johansson. NR. Distributed by: Buena Vista. Running time: 142 minutes.

Nothing but the naked truth

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FILM REVIEW

Watching Steve McQueen's new opus *Shame* — about an early middle-aged NYC sex addict — you realize that the writer-director is not trying to get under the male lead's pants. Rather, it's the mind he's aiming at, or the soul, if you're a believer.

On the surface, Brandon (Michael Fassbender) is just like any other urbanite corporate exec. Early to work, out at 6 for a round of drinks at a nearby lounge, and back home it is, supposedly. But there's a dark corner in Brandon's private life. While developing an irrepressible, insane obsession with intimacy — the kinkier the better — there's no way he can make a connection with another human being. One-night stands are followed by another round of meaningless, even brutal sex, watching porn, masturbating, filling his spare time with the pursuit of sexual encounters.

Brandon's apartment is a close reflection of his own emptiness: posh in a minimalist fashion, about the only pieces of furniture are an ultra chic designer's sofa and a dres-

soir with a phone-answer machine on it. The contraption serves no communication purpose: Brandon never picks up. It's almost always his sister Sissy's voice on the speaker phone, begging him to answer, expressing her anguish at living on her own in another city. Although it's never explicitly mentioned, it's clear that Brandon and Sissy are desperately lonely and have only one another in this world.

Still, Brandon refuses to acknowledge his only chance at making a human connection. True, Brandon does have a social life at work and with fellow workers, but the remaining hours after his work day is done drag him into an existential abyss.

It's only when Sissy (Carey Mulligan) comes a-calling that Brandon manifests a reaction — anger at the fact that his carefully protected privacy will not be his and his alone, at least for some time. Sissy, a torch singer, has signed up for a series of gigs at a lounge bar. Upon her sister's request, Brandon grudgingly accepts to see her act. Accompanied by a co-worker on the lookout for an easy lay, the evening ends at Brandon's apartment (so far His own sanctuary) where he is forced to hear the proceedings in his bedroom.

Sissy has not outdone Brandon, she's just started to show signs of emulating her brother's behaviour. Against his own will, Brandon admonishes her not to expect calls after a shag, for no-one in their right mind would expect a casual sex partner to run through an index of possible repeats.

Photographed mostly in beautiful shades of greyish blue to reflect Brandon's cold reaction to any sign of human bonding, *Shame* makes its point by, among other things, exposing every inch of Mr. Fassbender's slender yet well-defined body, over and over, with no shame or sense of guilt to speak of. It's not that Mr. Fassbender is always caught in the very private act of disrobement — it's the nakedness of his body that bespeaks, most eloquently so, his fragility and excruciating existential angst.

It might be accurately said that director McQueen revels in the male beauty exuded by Mr. Fassbender, perhaps excessively so, it may be argued, but truth is, few actors would have dared to perform *au naturel* like Mr. Fassbender does. That is, exposing not so much the nakedness of his body but the grief and agony of a soul in distress, the kind of pain nothing and no-one can assuage. Fassbender's turn is



Fassbender as a sex addict in Steve McQueen's *Shame*.

irresistibly fascinating, just like the compulsion Brandon feels when confronted with the nothingness of the imitation of life he has built for himself.

In mildly comparative terms, *Shame* may be likened with Bertolucci's once-controversial *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), in which a clandestine relationship was wrongly perceived as cheap titillation, bypassing the secret lovers' agony and despair, for which brutal sex was the only possible outlet.

Shame works in much the same way, beautifully, masterfully denuding the human body and its carnal appetite to express the anguish experienced by painfully lonely souls.

There's actually no shame in McQueen's movie, only pungent social and individual observation, so accurate that it may pique myopic viewers and critics.

NO SHAME. Diamond Pictures, the Argentine distributors of *Shame*, yesterday said in a press statement that the Cinemark multiplex chain would not be screening *Shame* due to its high-voltage erotic content. There's no such thing as inconvenient mature content in *Shame*, and Diamond Pictures has a perfectly clean record as the distributor of high-quality films like the critically acclaimed *A Single Man* (2009), and the Oscar-winning *The King's Speech* (2010).