

Film Review – The Avengers

by Ryan McNeely

Marvel's Avengers Assemble

Or, you know, The Avengers.

Loki has come to Earth to subjugate all of humanity. All that stands in his way is an untested experiment: the Avengers Initiative. Captain America, Iron Man, Thor and Hulk, along with Black Widow and Hawkeye, must join forces in order to defeat Loki's extraterrestrial army and save the planet. There's just one problem. None of them seem to play well with others. Ass-kicking, and a surprising amount of comedy, ensues.

So, is it as good as we all hoped it would be? Let me come back to that one.

With Cabin In The Woods and now this, 2012 is looking like the year when the rest of the world catches on to what geeks like me have been saying for fifteen years: everything Joss Whedon touches to gold. There are elements in this film that track back through all his earlier work, as if his entire career has been gearing up to this monster of a movie. Of course the most obvious one is the ensemble cast. Every one of his shows has featured a team at its heart, be it Buffy and her Scooby Gang or the staff of Angel Investigations, but the best comparison is to the crew of Serenity from the tragically short-lived Firefly in terms of the conflicts and mistrust that occurred between the characters.

That is a key element in Avengers Assemble: remember that, aside from the SHIELD agents, none of these heroes have any experience of working in a group. When they are brought together by Nick Fury and his operatives, there is a real sense of the personality clashes. Of course that is something

that Marvel has been building up through the Cinematic Universe since Iron Man. The fact that these characters are all known entities helps that no end. This movie could have been made without the previous flicks, but it wouldn't be nearly as successful. The backstory is a shorthand that allows Joss to bring in the superheroes without wasting a whole first act on telling us who they are and what they can do.

This in turn means that the new or lesser-known characters – particularly Clint 'Hawkeye' Barton and Maria Hill of SHIELD – get a chance for some initial development. And of course it's always great to see Agent 'SuperPhil' Coulson and Black Widow again, which brings me to another key component of Whedon's work: the bad-ass female fighter. To the roster of Buffy, Faith, River and Echo you can now add Natasha Romanoff. She got to kick some ass when she first showed up in Iron Man 2, but this takes her to a whole other level. Black Widow more than holds her own alongside the God of Thunder and a giant green rage monster.

Speaking of giant green rage monsters, Mark Ruffalo is great in his first gig as Bruce Banner and Hulk. Yes, he actually plays Hulk too. For the first time, the big guy was created via motion capture with Ruffalo acting the part on the set alongside his compadres. This means that he is a more realistic (ha!) presence within the scene, particularly when it comes to interaction with his teammates. Hulk is also the source of a lot of the bigger laughs in the movie, but not in a forced way. I was at the 11am screening which was sold out², and of course Robert Downey Jr. is quipping left and right to great effect but when Jolly Green made his joke the place was in uproar.

No, I'm not going to tell you what it was. No spoilers here today. It was also really fun to see Banner and Stark bonding over science like the two nerds they are, all the baggage of being a billionaire playboy and a monster momentarily forgotten. Because that's what Avengers Assemble is really

about; this group of individuals being motivated by an outside threat into becoming a team and working together to save the Earth.

I think what I liked most about the script is that everyone is given their time to shine. Every single character gets that hero moment. If you look past all the sharp dialogue and pop-culture references and the strong female characters that have typified Whedon's work, the one big thing that he excels at is the way he can marshal a big group and make them all unique individuals. This film has got eleven key roles in it and not one of them feels short-changed. They are all fully-defined people, not just ciphers there to say the words and take up space in the shot. Of course the writer and director is only one side of that equation. You need the actors too. There are no bum notes among the cast.

As I've said before, most of the actors have appeared as these characters already which is not only a benefit to us as viewers, but also to them. They've already lived with these characters and got to know them, making the performances all the more believable. As good as everyone is, there are always one or two that deserve to be singled out. For my money those are RDJ, Chris Evans and Tom Hiddleston as Loki from among the Marvel vets. Over the span of now three movies we've seen so much change in Tony Stark, from arrogant playboy to prisoner, to driven man on a mission (and that was just the first flick!) then in Iron Man 2 he was tortured by his impending death – at least until a little nudge from Fury and his old man – which manifested as something between ennui and nihilism, but he was still the one-man-band, despite his brief tag-team moment with Rhodey. Now here he has to learn to be a part of something larger than himself, to work alongside his intellectual equal and his physical superiors; basically, to take orders.

Evans' Captain America is a man out of time. Everyone he ever knew, loved or fought beside is dead and he now has to try and

make a life for himself in this strange new world. He is just as much of an alien as Thor or Loki, but at least they can go back if they want to. His scenes with Clark Gregg as SuperPhil were among my favourites in the whole film. The look of bemusement on Cap's face as Coulson went full fanboy was just priceless. As for Hiddleston, in his hands Loki is a slighted child, pissed at big brother and wanting to make a name for himself. Yes, he wants to rule Earth and make humanity his bitch, but he believes that the world will be better under his yoke. He does evil deeds, but he is not truly evil in and of himself.

Let's talk about the 3D for a second for a bit, shall we? I know some of you are all "3D sucks! It's just a fad!" and I can appreciate your argument, but I respectfully disagree. Modern 3D represents a sea change in the way films will be made and seen in the years to come and it's time we all got used to that. When it's done right it can be remarkable, but to be done right the film has to be shot in the format. I am not a huge fan of post-conversion. Avengers Assemble is a post-conversion movie and while the quality of the work is much improved from even as recently as Clash Of The Titans (for example) it is not yet up to the standard of natively-shot 3D. Instead of a fully immersive image, we get something that resembles those greetings cards you used to make in school where you cut a shape out of wrapping paper with a repeating pattern and built it up in layers: the total picture has depth to it, but each layer within that picture is still a flat image.

I am not anti-3D, but even though this is the best post-conversion movie I've been to you will not miss out by seeing Avengers Assemble in a standard 2D screening. The IMAX, however, is absolutely glorious. Norn Irn's own Seamus McGarvey has done an excellent job with the cinematography, and the score by Hollywood legend Alan Silvestri is just right. Both accomplish their goals without drawing too much

attention to themselves, which is as it should be. Just like with every other aspect of the film, there is no showboating for the sake of it. Avengers Assemble is a true team effort.

So, is it as good as we all hoped it would be? Damn right it is.

P.S.

Don't get me started on Firefly, or this column is in real danger of glossing over Avengers Assemble altogether and turning into a rant. And yes, I've given up trying to fight over the name.

Even though it's Avengers Assemble, I was a little surprised by how full the cinema was that early in the day. I had to reign myself in from screaming "Do none of you people have jobs?" when my toes were stood on for the fourth time by some idjit trying to get past me.

Ryan McNeely's film reviews can be read here on his own site

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