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SPIDER-MAN 2

Spider-Man 2 might not be, as many critics have concluded, the greatest comic-book movie ever made, but it's entirely possible that Sam Raimi is the greatest director the genre has ever had.

Though I love Bryan Singer's work in the *X-Men* pictures, not even he displays Raimi's artful combination of the insouciant and the respectful. There's nothing remotely heavy-handed about Raimi's direction of the Spider-Man movies – like their title character, they're lithe and graceful – and these works contain an almost startling amount of real emotion; though more lighthearted and far less epic, Raimi's Spider-Man adventures have some of the gravitas of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Those who've been Raimi fans since his *Evil Dead* heyday can't be the least surprised by the bravado of *Spider-Man 2*'s blockbuster set-pieces – no director films an action sequence more imaginatively than Raimi, and he always knows exactly where to position his camera for maximum punch – yet as thrilling as they are, you leave the theater thinking only of Tobey Maguire's Peter Parker and Kirsten Dunst's Mary Jane Watson; Raimi ends the film on a marvelously bittersweet note when he could have gone for an audience-friendly, sockaroo finish, and the results are deeply satisfying. (By the end of *Spider-Man 2*, you may be almost embarrassed at how much emotional investment you have in this comic-book universe.) Though the script occasionally fumbles, Raimi's work in the movie is nearly faultless (and bound to be criminally underrated).

In fact, were the screenplay on a par with Raimi's direction of it, the movie might indeed be the new classic many are proclaiming it as. Yet while it's a vast improvement over David Koepp's by-the-numbers screenplay for 2002's *Spider-Man* – this one is credited to Alvin Sargent, based on a screen story by Alfred Gough, Miles Millar, and Michael Chabon, whose novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is an incredibly passionate paean to the joys of comic books – the *Spider-Man 2* script is a bit of a mixed bag. The antagonist for this installment is Dr. Octopus (very well-played

by Alfred Molina), and while he's a fascinating character, with monstrous tentacles that look as though they should be doing battle with Sigourney Weaver, his transformation from kindly egghead to uber-villain is clumsily handled, and after much consideration and many discussions with friends, I'm still not sure what Doc Ock's demonic master plan *was*; I know it involved fusion and the creation of energy, but what, exactly, was he going to *do* with this? Dr. Octopus is such a visually arresting character that it barely matters that almost nothing he does makes much sense – at one point, he attempts a bank robbery in order to obtain funds for his creation, and I couldn't help wondering just who he was planning to give that money *to* – yet it makes the movie a little lopsided; with the script dissecting Peter Parker's life so thoroughly, the Doc Ock subplot almost comes across as an intrusion. And while too little attention is paid to the villain's escapades, I'd argue that too much is paid to Peter's travails, marvelous though Maguire is in the role; I'm not sure we needed the subplot involving Aunt May (Rosemary Harris) losing her house, and the middle of the film becomes *so* mired in Peter's identity crisis and navel-gazing that the film threatens to turn into the comic-book equivalent of *thirtysomething*; by the time Doc Ock shows up again, you'd almost forgotten he was *in* the movie.

In a summer blockbuster loaded with so many riches, though, this is practically nitpicking. Every action scene in the film – especially Spidey's encounter with a runaway train – is spectacularly shot and edited, and the effects have improved exponentially over the last two years; the CGI is more realistic this time, without losing the original film's demented, nearly animated kineticism. The supporting cast – especially James Franco as Harry and J.K. Simmons as blustery J. Jonah Jameson – is completely on-target, and, of course, Tobey Maguire and Kirsten Dunst have the kind of delicate, almost preternatural rapport that screen romance yearns for; the *Spider-Man* films are wildly entertaining rides, yet it's the teamwork of Maguire and Dunst that truly makes these films magical. This, too, is a tribute to Sam Raimi, who gives his leads room to breathe within the scope of his action-adventure saga; he understands that, for many, Peter saving the world doesn't hold a candle to his getting a kiss from Mary Jane Watson. (With Dunst in the role, who would dare argue?) *Spider-Man 2*, despite its flaws, is almost ridiculously enjoyable, a rare sequel that manages to leave you craving even *more*.

WHITE CHICKS

Though the movie certainly wouldn't be any more amusing if its prosthetics were better, it is indeed true that the makeup in *White Chicks* completely trashes all hope of enjoyment. Watching Marlon and Shawn Wayans sashay about in their ghostly, not-quite-human masks with the dilated eyes is a creepy, discomfiting experience (they both resemble *Halloween*'s Michael Myers remade as a drag queen), and even if something hilarious *was* going on, you'd still be too bothered by their appearances to work up a laugh. This quadrillionth rip-off of *Some Like It Hot*, directed by Keenen Ivory Wayans, is so starved of personality and the script is so dependent on the humiliatingly forced machinations of the plot – it requires that every character in the film be a jackass – that *White Chicks* itself becomes an extension of its makeup: lacquered, immobile, and desperately unfunny.

TWO BROTHERS

When I mentioned to a friend that I thought Jean-Jacques Annaud's *Two Brothers* was really cute, he asked if the movie was *cute* cute, or make-you-want-to-

vomit
cute, and it's an important distinction. (Whenever anyone tells me that a movie they saw was cute, I make a mental note to avoid it like the plague.) What saves Annaud's work from being totally saccharine – it concerns two baby tigers who are separated and who reunite a year later – is the exquisite training that went behind the animals' "performances." The film is so masterfully edited and staged that everything the tigers do looks completely natural and even unexpected, and Annaud has fashioned the material so that the tigers actually come across as *characters*
; if I were the kind of person who'd go "Awww ... ," I might have done so repeatedly at *Two Brothers*
. Annaud doesn't seem nearly as comfortable with humans – excepting subtle lead Guy Pearce, the portrayals range from undercooked to over-the-top – and the story doesn't hold any surprises. But nearly everything the animals do
is
a surprise;
Two Brothers
is first-rate entertainment for the under-10 set – the young audience I saw the film with was transfixed by the onscreen goings-on – and I can't believe the film isn't a bigger hit.