

Isn't It "Iron"-ic?: "Iron Man 2" and "Babies"

Written by Mike Schulz
Sunday, 09 May 2010 15:35

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IRON MAN 2

As expected, the rocket-fueled title character flies across the screen pretty damned quickly in director Jon Favreau's *Iron Man 2*, but this might be the very first comic-book movie to boast dialogue that zips by even *quicker*. By now, summer-blockbuster crowds are so used to being wowed

-
or, for some of us,

"
wowed
"

-
by pricey visuals and gargantuan action set pieces that the true thrill of Favreau

'
s and screenwriter Justin Theroux

'
s sequel comes as both a relief and a shock; how on earth did Paramount (thankfully) agree to shell out some \$200 million for what is, in essence, an updated take on a

'
30s screwball comedy? The climax in which our metal-plated superhero takes on more than a dozen artillery-laden robots is enjoyable enough, I guess, yet in terms of actual celluloid magic, it doesn

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'
t hold a candle to the sight of
Iron Man 2

'
s
Robert Downey Jr. and Gwyneth Paltrow arguing over whether Latin is, or is not, a dead language.

It's probable, though, that a large portion of the movie's audience won't give two hoots about the banter, and for them, the filmmakers dutifully

-
and mostly unimaginatively

-
offer the expected comic-book-flick niceties: a heavily-tattooed, maniacal
ü
ber

-villain (Mickey Rourke) with a murderous vendetta and a pet cockatoo; a dweeb-ish governmental stooge (Sam Rockwell) intent on mass-producing Iron Man

'
s armor for personal gain; a mid-film crisis of character that finds our hero teetering toward the dark side. (There

'
s also a
mid-film interruption by Samuel L. Jackson

'
s Nick Fury, who shows up for no purpose other than to jazz audiences with the promise/threat of the forthcoming comic-book movie
The Avengers.

)
For too much of its length, you can feel this follow-up attempting to placate its target demographic with generic blow-

'
em-ups and shattering glass, and the tone in many of these sequences feels suspiciously off.
Iron Man

'
s wildly destructive battle against Don Cheadle

'
s James Rhodes, scored to Queen

'
s
"
Another One Bites the Dust,

"
emerges as both unpleasant and senseless, and a scene of Rockwell selling weaponry to Cheadle

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s military unit

-

the camera lingering on the firearms with fetishistic attention

-

is like soft-core porn for

Guns & Ammo

subscribers.

For all of its obviousness and heavy-handedness, however, and for all the details that feel less inspired than obligatory, *Iron Man 2* ends up a remarkably lighthearted, even buoyant, entertainment. To be sure, this was all but guaranteed upon Downey

,

s entrance, when his billionaire playboy Tony Stark

-

who publicly revealed himself to be Iron Man at the tail end of Favreau

,

s 2008 precursor

-

landed on stage amidst a thousand cheering fans, and shouted an ebullient

"

It

,

s good to be back

!

"

(Our silent response: Hell

yeah

it is.) Treating his character

,

s superheroics as a supreme form of play, Downey is even more madly inventive and effortlessly hilarious here than he was in the franchise

,

s first installment, and the act of watching Stark work out intricately detailed puzzles, his mind racing, is more inherently exciting than any number of CGI wonders; as usual, Downey

,

s performance gifts are special effects unto themselves.

Yet what a smart and funny script Theroux provides him with, and what a bevy of talents he's routinely partnered with! Trading badinage and flirtations with stunning style, Paltrow

,

s gal Friday Pepper Potts matches Downey

,

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s Stark quip for quip

-

someone really should write a proper romantic comedy for these two

stat

-

and Scarlett Johansson delivers a deeply amusing turn as Stark

,

s curvaceous new assistant, her Natalie Rushman causing understandable strife for the film

,

s leading almost-lovebirds. (

"

Why don

,

t you

Google

her?

"

asks Pepper, biting, when questioning the vixen

,

s professional background.

"

I thought I was

ogling

her,

"

replies Stark.)

Rourke, who finds a dazzling middle ground between the satiric and the scarily sincere, creates a low-key, menacing Russian who's a perfect complement to Rockwell's sublimely clueless, whining egomaniac. And among such sterling comic talents as Cheadle, Favreau (playing right-hand man Happy Hogan), and the peerless Garry Shandling, Clark Gregg shows up as a deadpan secret agent, utters about five sentences at lightning-fast speed, and just about strolls off with the picture. (At the screening a friend and I attended, his curtain line elicited the biggest laugh in the auditorium, which is saying a

lot

.) Given its over-reliance on rote, noisy action spectacle, I left

Iron Man 2

slightly disappointed. Remembering the experience two hours later

-

and realizing that this comic-book extravaganza was also, thus far, 2010

,

s wittiest and most enthralling comedy

-

I found it hard to wipe the grin from my face.

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BABIES

Anyone who's ever described a baby - most likely his or her *own* baby - as "a little miracle" will likely use the same description for

Babies

, director Thomas Balmès' 75-minute documentary that follows a year in the lives of four infants (once each from Namibia, Mongolia, Tokyo, and San Francisco), tracing their journeys from birth to their first birthdays. The film, which contains no voice-over narration, is nothing more or less dramatic than that, but it's absolutely worth catching even if the thought of an entire feature devoted to a quartet of mewling, oh-so-adorable pre-toddlers instantly sets off your gag reflex.

Yes,

Babies

features about as heavy an "

Aw-w-w-w!!!

" quotient as is humanly conceivable - it's an ideal entertainment for audiences who found

March of the Penguins

a bit too downbeat and gritty - and the frequent images of tykes drifting off to sleep does have an inarguably soporific effect. Yet whenever the movie threatens to dawdle, it quickly rebounds with a scene of exquisite comedy or genuine wonder (or a scene that

combines

the two), and it's startlingly profound without making a big deal of the accomplishment; I can't think of another film that so simply, effectively explores and demonstrates basic human connections among people of vastly different geographies and cultures. (God knows it isn't

Babel

.) Balmès' offering is too slight, and slightly too precious, to be considered a truly great movie.

But

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Babies

is still a patient, fascinating, and wholly enjoyable one, and proof positive that the sight of an infant learning to walk, or learning to talk, or catching her first view of herself in a mirror is utterly endearing no matter which continent these events occur in. The movie is

aw-w-w-w

esome.