Written by Mike Schulz Sunday, 16 December 2012 10:12



THE HOBBIT: AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

In all honesty, I was a little bored by Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* before the movie even started. A nearly three-hour fantasy adventure with a colon in the title based on (one-third of) a beloved J.R.R. Tolkein title? A tale of dwarfs and elves, and a kindly old wizard played by Ian McKellen, concerning a perilous trek across New Zealand? An epic narrative involving an innocent's coming of age, and inanimate objects that prove surprisingly ambulatory, and a shriveled schizophrenic with bulging eyes who mourns the loss of his "*Precious-s-s-s*

"? Haven't we all been here before? And beyond securing gazillions of dollars for New Line Cinema, was there really any need to go back?

Regarding that last question, the answer is "Probably not." But so long as this first segment of Jackson's latest trilogy exists, we might as well be grateful that it's actually pretty good, and not the depressingly sub-par *Lord of the Rings* knock-off that its description and underwhelming trailers might lead you to expect. (We should also be grateful that the film isn't an unholy embarrassment on the scale of Jackson's previous feature, 2009's

The Lovely Bones

.) To be sure, the movie feels unduly padded; you could probably finish reading Tolkien's entire novel in the time required to get through this portion of

The Hobbit

, which only takes us to the end of the book's sixth chapter. And between its time-killing battle sequences and its awkwardly timed and staged slapstick, the film features more clunker moments than you'll find in its director's 2001 through 2003 outings combined. Yet *An Unexpected Journey*

still delivers a more-than-fair amount of amusement and visual rapture, with its most inspired sequences – particularly the late-film rendezvous with that returning ring-hoarder Gollum – able to stand toe-to-toe with the best of Jackson's three-part, Oscar-winning opus. It all feels familiar, at times even

too

familiar, but the movie's been made with exquisite detail and obvious talent, and heaven knows it always gives you something wonderful to watch.

One of those things is Martin Freeman, cast as the titular hobbit Bilbo Baggins. (*The Lord of the Rings*

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Holm, though, does reprise his elder Bilbo in An Unexpected Journey 's prelude, and is one of several Rings

performers to make welcome return appearances in the film.) Freeman played the frequently exasperated Tim on the original, British version of

The Office

, and consequently, as with his American counterpart John Krasinski, I generally spend his first few minutes onscreen waiting for him to respond to the goings-on with comically incredulous, conspiratorial takes to the camera. Yet as he's currently proving as Dr. Watson in the BBC's updated (and rather brilliant) Sherlock Holmes series, Freeman can also be a terrifically subtle and empathetic dramatic actor, and happily, all of the man's performance gifts seem well-served here. Though less concerned with character than the

Rings

outings, this introductory

Hobbit

does provide solid rooting interest via Freeman's carefully modulated wonder and gradually dawning heroism; composer Howard Shore's overly insistent score may force most of the movie's sentiment on us, but Freeman, for his part, lends considerable, touching gravitas and emotional investment to the proceedings.



Yet the actor's contributions are still dwarfed (pun intended) by the oftentimes astonishing spectacle of *An Unexpected Journey*'s individual set pieces, even when they teeter on being abjectly meaningless. For instance, I'm not sure I understand why, during Bilbo's and his dwarf companions' quest to slay the dragon, their trek had to be interrupted by a vicious slug-fest between two enormous stone giants. (Bilbo and company aren't even *noticed*

by the warring monoliths.) But the visual effects are so jaw-droppingly excellent in this scene that its inclusion doesn't feel at all incongruous or unnecessary, and Jackson comes through with similar feats of take-your-breath-away magic throughout the picture, from the spectacular tease of that fire-breathing, barely glimpsed dragon to the genius choreography surrounding the climax's toppling footbridges and Humvee-sized birds.

Plus, best of all, Andy Serkis returns to his motion-capture role of Gollum, and while the movie is a fine time, the 15 minutes spent with this haggard creature with the strangled voice are among the absolute greatest minutes spent in the whole of 2012's cinematic output. Participating in *The Hobbit*'s famed game of riddles, and unable to decide if he should befriend Bilbo or eat him, Serkis' Gollum is, again, a queasily astounding creation – hilarious and terrifying in equal measure – and well worth the two-hour-plus wait it takes to encounter him. As

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my memories of Tolkien's book are hazy, I'm pretty sure that this is our one chance to enjoy the character in Jackson's trilogy (unless, perhaps, more padding is needed in the subsequent adventures). However, even if Gollum is absent from next December's

The Desolation of Smaug

follow-up,

An Unexpected Journey

is inventive and entertaining enough to get me borderline psyched for a return trip to Middle-Earth; I may not be completely looking forward to

The Hobbit

's

second part, but thanks to this impressive endeavor, I'm at least no longer dreading it.

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