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DAREDEVIL

Though he tries mighty hard, Ben Affleck isn't quite able to ruin *Daredevil*, Mark Steven Johnson's screen adaptation of the Marvel comic. Among comic-book fans, the news that Affleck would be portraying the tortured hero – an angry, despressed, and, oh yeah, blind lawyer who, when not losing cases in court, dons leather and kicks bad-guy ass – was met with a collective rolling of the eyes; a friend of mine, upon hearing about the casting, put it succinctly: "Oh great. It's gonna suck."

This attitude appears to have less to do with Affleck's abilities – though I don't know anyone who still *enjoys* his work – than it does with the near-universal knowledge that he's absolutely the wrong actor for a role like this. Back in 1997, he showed real promise and natural comic instinct in *Chasing Amy* and *Good Will Hunting*, and every once in a while a *Ch anging Lanes* or a *Jay & Silent Bob Strike Back* will open to remind us that he does have some talent. But in his big, "heroic" performances – *Armageddon*, *Pearl Harbor*, *The Sum of All Fears*

– he can come off as the worst actor you've ever seen. The smarminess tempered by earnestness, the damned choking-back-tears *sincerity* of the man: In film after film, he seems to be pleading for the audience's love, which can make viewers recoil all the more. In *Daredevil*, Affleck goes through the action-stud motions and the driven-anti-hero posturing, and everything he does feels phony. (And this isn't due to the comic-booky nature of the material – Tobey Maguire was mostly wonderful in a very similar role in *Spider-Man*, and Hugh Jackman pulled off this challenge spectacularly in *X-Men*.) Ben Affleck is at his best playing a lightly comedic dim bulb; despite his looks and physique, he's a joke as a film's heroic anchor. (It's telling that the only time he's really engaging in *Daredevil* is when bantering with his character's best friend, played, with cheerful aplomb, by Jon Favreau.)

Thankfully, once you get past Affleck and the film's mopey prologue, the rest of *Daredevil* is a lot more winning. Even for a comic-book movie, the plotting is shockingly thin: Daredevil attempts to rid Hell's Kitchen of crime, avenge his father's death, and romance a billionaire's daughter, Elektra (Jennifer Garner), who's like Daredevil's female alter-ego. Yet writer-director Johnson comes through with some terrifically clever aural and visual tricks to keep the action scenes fresh. Blinded as a youth after being splashed with toxic waste, Daredevil's other senses are heightened to an extraordinary degree, and Johnson pulls off a wonderful approximation of what it's like to hear with uncanny clarity and *almost* be able to see; the film's action sequences keep you off-guard by constantly shifting perspectives between *our* vantage point – which involves your typical, *Matrix*-influenced punching and kicking – and Daredevil's, and they hold your interest even though you don't particularly care about the battles' results.

The filmmakers are also to be commended for *Daredevil*'s pacing and brevity – at just under 100 minutes, the movie zips along nicely – and for the efforts of the supporting cast. Although her line readings are a little too sullen, Garner, as on TV's *Alias*, is a literal kick to watch, Michael Clarke Duncan uses his *basso profundo* tones to suitably insinuating effect, and best of all, Colin Farrell, playing Duncan's chief

henchman, gives the sort of electrifying, movie-stealing performance we've been expecting of him for years. It helps, I think, that he's finally been allowed to speak with his natural Irish brogue instead of affecting a generic American accent; he's far more relaxed, and more engaging, here than he has been in his leading (Americanized) roles. As the malicious Bullseye, Farrell is wickedly funny, twitchy, mean as hell, and more sheer fun than anything else in the movie. Ben Affleck would do well to take notice, for even though *Daredevil* stands as a not-bad entertainment, with a performer of Farrell's fearless invention in the lead, it might have been quite something.

SHANGHAI KNIGHTS

In *Shanghai Knights*, Jackie Chan performs some amusing routines involving a revolving door, an umbrella, and some priceless royal heirlooms, but damned if director David Dobkin doesn't try to undermine all of them with a jokey, effects-laden soundtrack that would seem bombastic in a Hanna-Barbera cartoon. I don't have very strong memories of the film's precursor, 2000's surprisingly genial *Shanghai Noon*, but I can't imagine that the background effects were *this* obnoxious. Every time Chan is involved in an action sequence, the soundtrack becomes peppered with "Sproing!" and "Whooshk!" and "Cra-a-ack!"; it's like a *Batman* episode for the visually impaired, and it has the added effect of making everyone in the audience feel like a seven-year-old. (Chan's umbrella trickery could be a lovely, funny homage to *Singin' in the Rain* if Dobkin didn't belabor his point by actually *playing* "Singin' in the Rain" underneath the action.) The effects provide infantile humor for a sequel that's already pretty dopey. Although Chan and Owen Wilson share a playful chemistry, the only humor comes from Wilson's 19th Century character saying "Cool!" and referring to yoga; you expect this series' amusement to be anachronistic, but you don't expect those anachronisms to be the sole extent of its wit. *Shanghai Knights* might play to the kiddie crowd; the rest of us can find similar, more well-earned laughs watching Ben Affleck glower in red leather tights.

HOW TO LOSE A GUY IN 10 DAYS

Is there any cinematic sight more precious, and more unbearable, than watching two movie stars attempt to out-cute one another? In *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, magazine writer Kate Hudson comes up with a story idea: She'll get some poor shnook to fall in love with her, make his life a living hell, and write an exposé on the things women do to repel men. The shnook in question, though, turns out to be Matthew McConaughey, who is involved in a scheme of his own; he bets his buddies that he can get any woman to fall in love with him, and simultaneously chooses Hudson as his mark. This premise is already chin-deep in affected frivolity, and that's *before*
Hudson and McConaughey sink their teeth into it. The best you could hope from any romantic comedy with a setup this forced is that the stars, through humor and inspired give-and-take, would transcend it, but
How to Lose a Guy
caters to both leads' most narcissistic impulses, Hudson with her slightly wilted flower-child aura, and McConaughey with his drawling, laconic self-satisfaction; they might almost be acting in front of separate mirrors. The film's only bite, unsurprisingly, comes from Bebe Neuwirth's blissfully dry line readings; she seems like the only human being in a movie filled with lazy stereotypes and preening Hollywood divas.