The Amazing Spider-Man

PG-13

136 Minutes

Rating: ****

The Amazing Spider-Man marks the return of one of the most popular of all superheroes to the big screen, and for the most part it is a triumphant one. Director Marc Webb seems to have a great handle on the story and everything that should go along with it, while the script successfully addresses almost all the major plot points that a worthy Spider-Man film has to have.

The lead casting is nearly perfect. Andrew Garfield is great as both the geeky, outcast Peter Parker and his flamboyant, daredevil alter ego. Peter Parker has to be exceptionally likeable and good-hearted, but somewhat flawed, basically a typical teenager who may not really be ready for the power Fate bestows upon him, and Garfield nails the part with apparent ease. Emma Stone is just as fine as Gwen Stacy, Peter’s love interest. Stone makes Gwen smart, vibrant, and attractive, so much so that she captures the viewer’s heart along with poor smitten Peter’s. Dennis Leary is perhaps cast somewhat against type as Gwen’s father, a policeman who is out to arrest the mysterious Spider-Man, but he handles the role so well that it would have been a shame for anyone else to have gotten the part. And Rhys Ifans does a great tragic turn as the reluctant villain of the story, Dr. Curt Connors, whose risky scientific adventures give birth to the monstrous Lizard.

The film looks terrific from beginning to end. Special effects never fail, from Spider-Man’s mind-boggling feats of superhuman agility to the Lizard’s bestial transformations from man to monster and back again. Action isn’t quite as prevalent as one might expect—the story is heavily character-oriented, built around Peter’s evolution as a person and his relationships with Gwen as well as his beloved Aunt May and Uncle Owen. But when the action does break loose, it’s wild and crazy, and certainly never disappoints.

But still, there are a few problems, and for the record I don’t think The Amazing Spider-Man ever quite equals the Sam Raimi film from ten years ago. The biggest flaw is that the new movie doesn’t address the problem of personal responsibility to the degree that a Spider-Man story should. Comic fans may be disappointed to learn that the immortal words “With great power, comes great responsibility,” are never uttered. The idea is dealt with, but a bit ambiguously, and lacks the concentrated gravitas that that simple phrase has always imparted to Spider-Man’s rather tragic origin story. Less significantly, Peter’s Aunt and Uncle are portrayed as a bit too young (though played by great actors, namely Sally Field and Martin Sheen), and while the Lizard is a neat villain, his grand plan seems a bit too far out, even for a comic book movie.

But what works about The Amazing Spider-Man outweighs what doesn’t. It’s an exciting story, but one made dramatically stronger by its clear affection for its characters. Evidently the first installment in what could be a trilogy of films, The Amazing Spider-Man is a welcome addition to the Spider-Man legend.