

## J.J. Abrams Finds Magic in Wonderful ‘Super 8’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on June 8, 2011 - 9:23am

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – J.J. Abrams’ “Super 8” comes to theaters this week shrouded in mystery, nostalgia, and expectation. What do the aliens look like? How will it pay homage to the works of Steven Spielberg that so clearly inspired it? And will the merging of two filmmakers amplify their flaws or underline their strengths? I’ve rarely been happier to report that “Super 8” is a success on every level, whether you’ve seen the films that it echoes or not. Halfway through “Super 8” I stopped thinking about the films that inspired Abrams to make it and started envisioning the works that would be inspired by THIS movie. Yes, it’s that good.

Because so much of the joy of “Super 8” is in the way it unfolds, this review will be completely devoid of significant spoilers, but even those wouldn’t ruin the movie. Just as the red matter in “Star Trek” or the secrets of the island in “Lost” weren’t the keys to the success of those J. J. Abrams properties, the action in “Super 8” isn’t nearly as important as what it develops in the young characters. “Super 8” is a film about letting go, growing up, falling in love, and fatherhood. It is a coming-of-age film disguised as a summer alien movie. Just as Spielberg’s best films merge relatable humanity with the unimaginable (aliens, giant sharks, etc.), “Super 8” is a movie about a runaway alien in which the viewer starts caring more about the people involved than the creatures they encounter. In many ways, that may be its most remarkable accomplishment.



Super 8

*Photo credit: Paramount Pictures*

Just as with “E.T.” and “Close Encounters,” the human leads are essential to the film’s success and this time it’s a group of kids led by the charismatic Joel Courtney and future superstar Elle Fanning. Courtney plays Joe Lamb, a movie-obsessed young man who recently lost his mother and is distant from his father (Kyle Chandler of “Friday Night Lights”), who happens to be the Deputy of the small town in which the entirety of the film takes place. Joe gets together with his buddies and makes super 8 movies inspired by the works of George A. Romero that are directed by the outgoing Charles (Riley Griffiths). Martin (Gabriel Basso), Preston (Zach Mills), and Cary (Ryan Lee) are also wannabe filmmakers but everything changes when Charles asks the prettiest girl at school, Alice Dainard (Elle Fanning), to play the wife of their zombie-hunting detective. Joe and Alice immediately become close friends, much to the chagrin of their fathers (Ron Eldard plays Louis Dainard) for reasons that I will not spoil here.

The gang of “Goonies”-esque kids becomes involved in the action of “Super 8” when they are filming their zombie movie late at night at an empty train station. As Alice wows the boys with her incredible acting ability (in a scene that turns the young actress into a star as much as any this year), a train comes speeding towards the station. Joe turns to see a truck speeding toward the locomotive from the other direction. The two collide and an amazing derailment sequence unfolds, followed by something unseen bursting loose from one of the compartments.



Super 8

*Photo credit: Paramount Pictures*

After a terrifying encounter with the driver of the truck that clearly derailed the train on purpose, the kids vow to never speak of what they have seen. Of course, it’s not long before things in town are getting funky. Car engines go missing, as does the Sheriff. Before you know it, a giant creature is swooping through town unseen (of course “Super 8” follows the classic late reveal formula that was nearly patented by Spielberg) and the kids realize that they’re at the center of something much bigger than they ever could have imagined in their movies.

“Super 8” is a film that works in whatever way you want to approach it – as homage, action movie, family adventure, etc. Fans of Spielberg and Abrams will marvel at how neatly it fits in the filmographies of either man. It plays to the strengths of both. Yes, the final act gets a bit sentimental and if those elements of Spielberg or Abrams turn you off then you’ll have a problem with it. (I think it’s perfect and anyone who wasn’t expecting a sentimental end from Spielberg & Abrams clearly doesn’t know their work.) Personally, I was awed at how brilliantly this screenplay weaved its way through decades of popular film and came out as a perfect merge of two great creative voices. Many of Spielberg’s films have been about how the unimaginable forces us to change and “Super 8” fits snugly within that theme. At the same time, the film is undeniably that of J.J. Abrams, right down to the abundance of lens flare.





Super 8

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

And yet if you’ve never seen a Spielberg or Abrams film or don’t give a damn who gets the credit for your entertainment, “Super 8” is straight-up fun. It is a remarkably well-made action/adventure of the kind that they don’t make that often any more. It’s not a sequel, not based on a video game, and doesn’t feature superheroes. It’s old-fashioned summer entertainment like it used to be – actually entertaining. There are sequences in here – the train, the bus, the gas station, the finale – that will truly stand the test of time.

As for the young cast, Abrams deserves credit for directing them all to deliver solid performances but the movie belongs to Courtney and Fanning, both of whom are stellar. Courtney is good but it’s Fanning who becomes an undeniable star with “Super 8.” She’s been good before – “The Door in the Floor,” “Somewhere”—but she’s absolutely spectacular here.

And that’s the word that I keep thinking of in relation to “Super 8” – spectacular. It reminds me of movies that made me want to write about film in the first place. It is a work inspired by other movies that will surely inspire future filmmakers. The journey of inspiration continues.

*“Super 8” stars Joel Courtney, Elle Fanning, Kyle Chandler, Ron Eldard, Riley Griffiths, Gabriel Basso, Zach Mills, and Ryan Lee. It was written and directed by J.J. Abrams and opens on June 10th, 2011, but you can see it a day early with a special sneak preview ([go here](#) [16] for all the details.)*



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**Source URL (retrieved on Apr 16 2024 - 4:55am):**

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