

Despite Disastrous Skinny Steve, ‘Captain America: The First Avenger’ is Perfectly Imperfect

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – With mammoth special effects budgets carelessly puked into blockbuster films these days without story or heart, it’s effortless to wow audiences with beguiling explosions and one or two trademark, “The Matrix”-like innovations.

And while “Captain America: The First Avenger” unsurprisingly doesn’t disappoint in that easily impressive department, the film ultimately succeeds where most comic book adaptations fail: a love connection you actually feel, a mostly cohesive story and a believable superhero who manages to inspire all without being too unrealistic.



Chris Evans as Captain America in “Captain America: The First Avenger”.

Image credit: Jay Maidment, Marvel Studios

Instead of saving the planet with supernatural powers, this man of steel merely wields a badass shield. As the World War II-set film is this summer’s only mainstream superhero flick, it already has advantages over the recent “Thor” and “Green Lantern”. “Captain America: The First Avenger” has taken great strides to embody a relatable hero who’s born into strength from weakness. Quite simply, his head’s on

straight and his heart’s in the right place.

And while the costuming and American patriotism are well known, the layman is still confusingly hazy on what super powers fuel this superhero. Captain America is just blessed with strength and speed thanks to a somewhat realistic, government-administered serum. While this plot line directly pilfers from Jason Bourne’s films, Captain America refreshingly isn’t invincible.

Also, “Skinny Steve” Rogers (Chris Evans) gets a really freaking hard shield soon after he steps in a box and poops out a Herculean and strapping Captain America. If steroids would work that fast today, professional baseball players everywhere would be salivating with envy.



Chris Evans (front) as Steve Rogers (Skinny Steve) in “Captain America: The First Avenger”.

Image credit: Paramount Pictures

While Steve willingly volunteers for this dramatic muscular and cellular transformation, it serves as the film’s most ridiculous and unrealistic scene. But at least the scrawny-to-stout makeover is the death of the film’s most painfully awkward and completely botched creation: Skinny Steve.

Seriously, people? Why do so much right but do this so utterly and disgustingly wrong? The film, which is the fifth live-action adaptation of this superhero, had a \$140 million production budget. And we get this drivel? We can enjoy much better poppycock in a feature-length film where all we see for 120 straight minutes is a single blade of grass trying to grow.

Contrary to common belief, a superimposed Chris Evans head wasn’t used on a body double (similar to this film critic’s) for the more than 250 Skinny Steve shots. Rather, director Joe Johnston – who ended up directing the film even though Jon Favreau (“Iron Man”) was originally chosen by Marvel Studios and Nick Cassavetes was later scouted – became addicted to what he claimed was a series of irreplaceable body movements by Evans.



Chris Evans as Captain America in “Captain America: The First Avenger”.

Image credit: Jay Maidment, Marvel Studios

So, digital technology downright devastated the job of “shrinking” a normally stalwart Chris Evans. This disastrous stab at using Hollywood magic resulted in erasing pieces of his physique. This gawkily created impossible-to-ignore elements like his missing chin. The telescoping of Evans’ real build even cost the film more money because green screens had to be used to superimpose backgrounds back where empty spaces were created.

This digital shrinkage is a classic case of technology for technology’s sake and is one of the most epic failures in superhero moviemaking history.

That said, when Chis Evans isn’t Skinny Steve, he perfectly embodies a full-of-heart Captain America. He stepped into the role only after a long list of other men – including Will Smith, Sam Worthington, Garrett Hedlund, Channing Tatum, John Krasinski, Jensen Ackles , Mike Vogel, Kellan Lutz, Ryan Phillippe and Alexander Skarsgård – didn’t make the cut or didn’t want the part. The perfect peach Hayley Atwell, who trained six days a week for the leading love role opposite Evans, won out to play Peggy Carter over Alice Eve and Keira Knightley. Emily Blunt turned it down.



Hayley Atwell as Peggy Carter in “Captain America: The First Avenger”.

Image credit: Jay Maidment, Marvel Studios

This is now the seventh comic book movie for Evans following “Fantastic Four,” “Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer,” “TMNT,” “Push,” “The Losers” and “Scott Pilgrim vs. the World”. Surprisingly, though, Evans actually declined the role *three times* before taking the gig. Ultimately director Joe Johnston and the film’s producers swayed him to come on board in the title role by presenting him with a mouth-watering lump of Colby-jack cheese. Well, at least the first part of that sentence rings true.

In the film, Captain America faces off with a worthy adversary known as Red Skull (Hugo Weaving). The devil-faced, Hitler-like villain is combing the planet for an omnipotent artifact known as the Cosmic Cube. Ironically, Weaving also voiced the villain Megatron in “Transformers” and that character also rummaged the globe for a similar cube-shaped vestige known as the AllSpark.

All in all, “Captain America: The First Avenger” producer Avi Arad says his film’s “biggest opportunity” is having a “man out of time” who returns today (which is 60 years later for him) and sees our world through the lens of someone whose haven was small-town America. While the film has a rare chance to answer the deep question of whether or not we’re better off today than six decades ago, the opportunity’s blown.



Stanley Tucci as Dr. Abraham Erskine in “Captain America: The First Avenger”.

Image credit: Jay Maidment, Marvel Studios

And it’s missed even more with the cameo of Samuel L. Jackson as the cigar-chomping, eyepatch-wearing Nick Fury. Instead of fleshing out the fictional World War II army hero and present-day Marvel Comics super spy, Fury is glossed over and merely used as an instrument to ask Captain America if he understands where and when he now is.

About 60 percent of the worldwide \$445-million theatre gross for “Thor” came from foreign screens. And about 57 percent of the worldwide \$227-million movie gross for “The Green Hornet” also came from foreign theatres.



Hugo Weaving as Red Skull Stanley in “Captain America: The First Avenger”.

Image credit: Jay Maidment, Marvel Studios

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Why’s that relevant? Only time will tell if the controversially ballsy, American-focused tagline of “heroes are made in America” will alienate foreign audiences.

The film’s enjoyable retro vibe, believable love story and relatable “human superhero” will overshadow its flaws and potential audience gaps. And as with all Marvel films, remember to stay after the credits for a very brief, coming-in-2012 teaser.

“Captain America: The First Avenger” stars Chris Evans, Hayley Atwell, Hugo Weaving, Tommy Lee Jones, Stanley Tucci, Samuel L. Jackson, Dominic Cooper, Sebastian Stan, Richard Armitage, Toby Jones, Neal McDonough, Derek Luke, Kenneth Choi, JJ Feild and Bruno Ricci from director Joe Johnston and writers Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely. The film, which has a running time of 125 minutes, is rated “PG-13” for intense sequences of sci-fi violence and action. “Captain America: The First Avenger” opened on July 22, 2011.



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