

Spectacular ‘The Hunger Games’ Lives Up to High Expectations

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on March 20, 2012 - 8:08am

- [Billy Ray](#) [2]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [3]
- [Donald Sutherland](#) [4]
- [Elizabeth Banks](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [Jennifer Lawrence](#) [7]
- [Josh Hutcherson](#) [8]
- [Lenny Kravitz](#) [9]
- [Liam Hemsworth](#) [10]
- [Movie Review](#) [11]
- [Suzanne Collins](#) [12]
- [The Hunger Games](#) [13]
- [Wes Bentley](#) [14]
- [Woody Harrelson](#) [15]



Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Gary Ross’ “The Hunger Games” is a spectacular piece of blockbuster entertainment, a movie that should connect across all demographics from those who have never heard of the book to those who have shrines to Katniss and Peeta in their closets. It is more than mere Hollywood adaptation, it is a work of art on multiple levels with fantastic technical elements and some of the best performances in a work of science fiction in years. This is not just a great “blockbuster,” great “adaptation,” or great piece of “sci-fi.” It is a great MOVIE, period.

The number of strikingly smart decisions made during the production of “The Hunger Games” will naturally make up the majority of this review but they can all be collected under the critical umbrella of the overall sense that Ross, his screenwriters (he shares credit with source material author Suzanne Collins and great writer Billy Ray), his cast (especially Jennifer Lawrence), and his technical team clearly all operated from a drive that they weren’t just making escapist entertainment. “The Hunger Games” could have been SO silly. It could have taken place in an exaggerated universe that bears no resemblance to our own and had its many complex themes and emotions turned up to eleven in an attempt to appeal to the lowest common denominator – to get the most teenage butts in the seats on repeat viewings to increase what I expect will be an ENORMOUS box office haul. It could have been “Twilight” just as easily as it could have been “Harry Potter.” But one gets the sense very early on in “The Hunger Games” that this is a film made not by committee or out of pure financial motivation but by people striving to make not just a profitable movie but a great one. There’s a craftsmanship here that you don’t often see in blockbusters.



The Hunger Games

Photo credit: Lionsgate

It starts with Jennifer Lawrence, who is SO good that her performance will probably be underrated simply because her subtlety is unexpected in a film like this. She perfectly balances the strength and vulnerability of Katniss Everdeen, a young lady who volunteers to take the place of her sister when poor Prim Everdeen has her name called for the 74th Annual Hunger Games. Every year, the twelve districts of this future world send two “tributes” to the Games for a total of 24 teenage contestants. The two dozen young men and women are then whisked off to what are basically a series of promotional and training events. Learn how to fight but also learn how to smile, interview, and promote yourself to be popular enough for both producers and sponsors to want to keep you alive.

Chosen for the games with Katniss Everdeen is a frightened young man named Peeta Mellark (a perfect Josh Hutcherson) and the two run the gauntlet of preparation together including training by alcoholic former winner Haymitch (Woody Harrelson), interviews with Games host Caesar Flickerman (Stanley Tucci), assessment by producer Seneca Crane (Wes Bentley), image guidance by Cinna (Lenny Kravitz), and, well, something by the truly odd Effie Trinket (Elizabeth Banks). By the time they get to the actual Games, they’ve gone from young people who look like they could have been a part of a Depression-era community to reality TV stars of a violent future. And then the Games begin.



The Hunger Games

Photo credit: Lionsgate

Like so many modern movies, the credits follow the film instead of precede it but one doesn’t need to see the names of the cinematographer, editors, and composer to know that this is one of the most technically accomplished major sci-fi films in YEARS. But not in the flashy way you probably expect. Cinematographer Tom Stern (“Mystic River,” “Flags of Our Fathers”) was a spectacular choice as he brings a grittier, handheld style to the camera work that grounds it in a way that other options would have ignored. Eight-times-Oscar-nominated composer James Newton Howard contributes a perfectly-used and subtle score that doesn’t overplay its hand like so many blockbuster ones often do (and the great T. Bone Burnett advised on music as well). And Steven Soderbergh regular editor Stephen Mirrione (Oscar winner for “Traffic”) co-edits with Juliette Welling in a masterful way. The action is quick-cut but the movie often takes its time, hitting its beats perfectly during so many of the story’s key moments.

Admittedly, some of those beats feel a bit unnecessarily extended. It’s not that “The Hunger Games” is repetitive. It’s not. A lot of story is covered in 142 minutes (the “Twilight” people would have cut it into two movies) and I think one of the greatest strengths of the film is in how often it allows themes to exist without melodrama or underlining (the visual storytelling that is so often absent from blockbusters, a genre heavy on over-explanation, is incredible here). But there are times when I felt the length, particularly in the set-up act. I think there’s a slightly stronger version of “The Hunger Games” that runs 9-10 minutes shorter. (As long as we’re on the negative tip, a few of the special effects look bizarrely cheap and underdeveloped, especially those related to fire. But it’s just a minor complaint.)



The Hunger Games

Photo credit: Lionsgate

Having said that, there is no “slightly stronger” in the performance from Jennifer Lawrence. Some have expressed surprise that the beautiful, young actress chose to tie herself to a franchise so quickly after her breakthrough (we’ve seen how it has basically killed Kristen Stewart’s non-blockbuster career). It was the right move because Lawrence gives such a strong performance that one can’t imagine anyone else in the role. There are SO many elements of this character that could have been overplayed from her tough exterior to her softer moments with her sister and Peeta but Lawrence walks that fine line, never becoming too much of the super-heroine but also never letting the character become too vulnerable at the same time. She’s simply perfect, a great role model for young girls and we don’t have anywhere near enough of those in movies today. To be fair, Hutcherson and Harrelson deserve praise as well. They’re both fantastic.

Last summer was a surprisingly strong one for A-list blockbusters with films like “Super 8” and “Rise of the Planet of the Apes” connecting with critics as well as audiences. The trend continues. Let’s all hope that Summer 2012 produces blockbusters of the caliber of “The Hunger Games.”

“The Hunger Games” stars Jennifer Lawrence, Josh Hutcherson, Woody Harrelson, Lenny Kravitz, Elizabeth Banks, Wes Bentley, Donald Sutherland, Paula Malcomson, and Liam Hemsworth. It was adapted from the book by Suzanne Collins by Gary Ross and Collins and Billy Ray. It was directed by Ross. It opens nationwide on March 23rd, 2012 and is rated PG-13.



[16]

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