

Audacious ‘The Wolverine’ Also a Bit Excessive

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Following the release of “Iron Man 3” and “Man of Steel,” “The Wolverine” is the best of the bunch, simply by following “The Dark Knight” and the Marvel Comics formula, creating a conflicted superhero who cannot conform to any conventional definition of heroism.

But also like those aforementioned Summer of 2013 films, “The Wolverine” suffers from an overblown conclusion that based on other points of the narrative could have been avoided. It’s the story in this Wolverine saga that is the most intriguing of the super movies, not having to explain any origin of the man, yet still giving him enough angst to anticipate a savory redemption. The Asian angle was also a brilliant stroke – the film takes place in Japan – and includes an amazing flashback to the atomic bomb hit of Nagasaki during World War 2. This is grand entertainment in this genre, and almost – almost! – got through the whole story without resorting to special effect pyrotechnics. That is saved for the end, and although it’s intense, the massive size and excessive length wasn’t in proportion to the rest of the film.

Set after the events in the film “X-Men: The Last Stand,” Logan (Hugh Jackman) – also known as the sharp-clawed immortal mutant Wolverine – is having a life crisis. His lover Jean (Famke Janssen, in flashbacks) is dead, and he has taken himself out of circulation by living in the woods. An errant hunting incident forces him into the nearby town, and he is confronted with his past in the form of a visitor from Japan named Yukio (Rila Fukushima), an adopted granddaughter of Logan’s old World War 2 companion, Yashida (Haruhiko Yamanouchi).



Logan (Hugh Jackman) Goes to Japan in ‘The Wolverine’
Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

Yukio is assigned with bringing Logan to Yashida's deathbed in Japan, to say his goodbyes. This starts a chain of events that involves the dreaded Yakuza crime syndicate, who has price on the dying man's family. The natural granddaughter of the clan, Mariko (Tao Okamoto) is primed to take over the vast industrial empire of Yashida, in conflict with her father (Hiroyuki Sanada). The Wolverine is pulled into the ever escalating circumstance, while the crime syndicate has their own mutant power in pursuit, the Viper (Svetlana Khodchenkova).

Conceptually, the film has the advantage of not having to explain the powers or background of the Wolverine. This frees the tale to start in its lowly place, with a mental imbalance which begs for a re-emergence of the hero's power. Jackman is very effective in these scenes, seems to relish them, and the psychosis brought about by the loss of his lover is well played and affects his every movement throughout the rest of journey.

The setting in Japan – based in part on a comic book mini-series – allows for both for a refreshingly different type of setting and the addition of a culture which allows for samurai fighting, Tokyo industrialism and mystery framed with Japanese tradition. Wolverine is an immortal, so even as he survives the Nagasaki atomic bombing – one of the film's wild highlights – he must confront his immortality head-on in his Japanese adventure. It's also intriguing the familiar Hugh Jackman is working with an international unknown cast – it strengthens the overall theme of the stranger-in-a-strange-land.

The film is deliberate, and takes it time to explain motivations and villainy. There is a deadening reality to this in some points in the story, but the very presence of this deliberation sets "The Wolverine" into some darker and more relationship oriented challenges. There are spectacular fighting and action sequences surrounding his soul exploration, and these – for the most part – interact well with the carefully laid out path for a superhero absolution.



Viper (Svetlana Khodchenkova) Meets Logan in 'The Wolverine'
Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

It is in the conclusion where the story/action balance gets thrown off. Like "Iron Man 3" and "The Man of Steel," there is a prolonged battle at the end of "The Wolverine," which piles on the obviously computer generated fireworks. The way some of the evil is dispensed begs the question, 'why didn't you do that earlier?' – which happened in both the Iron Man and Superman epics. Granted, with the Wolverine it put closure to a key pursuit in the story, but it was excessive, and took up too much screen time.

But overall, it was great to see the distinct Marvel comics stamp on this character – they were the pulp fiction pioneers of allowing superheroes to question their very existence. And in the tour of his life that "The Wolverine" takes, it doesn't take an immortal soul to understand that time inevitably does heal.

"The Wolverine" opens everywhere on July 26th in 3D and regular screenings. See local listings for 3D theaters and show times. Featuring Hugh Jackman, Famke Janssen, Rila Fukushima, Tao Okamoto and Svetlana Khodchenkova. Screenplay by Mike Bombeck and Scott Frank. Directed by James Mangold. Rated "PG-13"



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