

Big Spectacle, Small Heart in ‘The Amazing Spider-Man 2’

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – For a film with so much eye candy that it threatens ocular diabetes, “The Amazing Spider-Man 2” is decidedly low in story rhythm and energy – even with a villain named Electro. The story also has the “three villain syndrome,” which allows for a lack of focus and heart.

But what is “amazing” about it is that the effects and atmosphere during the action sequences are other-worldly. Comic books have come to life, with no limits to whatever the creative imaginations can conjure, much like the era when superheroes evolved between the covers of a 12 cent dream. Spider-Man’s leaps, flips and web swings are in full blown 3D mode, yet the motivations of those actions are bloated and soft. Like a huge Thanksgiving bird, the film is stuffed to the gills, but the meat lacks flavor. That is not to say it’s a turkey, but it does gobble-gobble up too much territory and time in telling the story.

Spider-Man (Andrew Garfield) is an established protector in New York City, and sparks a bit of debate on whether he’s a vigilante or hero. In his secret identity as high school graduate Peter Parker, he still lives with his Aunt May (Sally Field), and courts the lovely Gwen Stacy (Emma Stone). After thwarting the villainy of Aleksei Sytsevich (Paul Giamatti) as Spider-Man, Peter must deal with the possibility that Gwen and he are losing their relationship.



Max (Jamie Foxx) Encounters Spider-Man (Andrew Garfield) in ‘The Amazing Spider-Man 2’

Photo credit: Columbia Pictures

In the background, there is a mystery involving a spider-based rejuvenating formula developed by Peter’s now deceased father (Campbell Scott) through Oscorp Industries. Peter’s friend Harry Osborne (Dane DeHaan) has taken over the company and is in a power struggle, which is exaggerated by a lowly Oscorp clerk named Max (Jamie Foxx), who has survived an overdose surge of voltage to emerge as a the villain Electro. Your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man has a lot on his plate.

There are too many subplots in this menagerie of story elements, which bogs down the film in the first establishing hour – which was surprising from the reliable action screenplay team of Alex Kurtzman and Roberto Orci. There are many connecting threads to interlace, a romance going sour, and several action sequences which seem to only be either generated or solved by the immediate group around Peter Parker. The familiar comic book characters are played like pawns on the story chessboard – moved from one square to another rather than advancing emotionally – and that includes Spider-Man.

However the visual spectacle is still sweeping, which was always the artistic strength in any good comic book. The villain Electro – brought to life through an oddly-cast Jamie Foxx – has a dazzling Times Square encounter with our hero, and director Marc Webb uses stop-action imagery in that sequence that recalls the graphic panels in a sizzling comic book layout. The production design of the web swinging and city saving Spider-Man still can excite, it’s just overcoming the vast non-action in the film that is the challenge.

Big stars are now populating comic book movies, and besides Oscar winner Foxx there is Giamatti, Field and Stone, but they seem lost among the mechanics of the comic book action and back stories. Stone especially is relegated to damsel sidekick, and Giamatti is a villain who snarls a lot, and not much else. DeHaan is vague as Harry Osborne, and his metamorphosis to yet another villain wasn’t savory enough to be mandatory.



Peter Parker (Garfield) Woos Gwen Stacy (Emma Stone) in ‘The Amazing Spider-Man 2’

Photo credit: Columbia Pictures

It’s the over-plotted nature of these huge comic book spectacles that can be their undoing. Introduce more than one villain – and this film took on three – then origins have to be told, and confrontations have to be had. This leaves little space to care about the characters – which is a vital glue to all the comic book visuals – and makes the ride feel too long. If you’re looking for Spider-Man action that creates a spark, it’s there, but you won’t learn much about Peter Parker.

Summer films are popcorn time, and comic book movies are perfect for buttery nights escaping into heroic lore. “The Amazing Spider-Man 2” wants to be that escape, but gets caught in the sticky trap of just too much, when all that is necessary is a web-slinger who makes the connection to us.

“The Amazing Spider-Man 2” opens everywhere on May 2nd, in 3D and regular screenings. Featuring Andrew Garfield, Emma Stone, Jamie Foxx, Dane DeHaan, Felicity Jones, Paul Giamatti, Sally Field, Campbell Scott and Stan Lee. Screenplay by Alex Kurtzman, Roberto Orci and Jeff Pinkner. Directed by Marc Webb. Rated “PG-13”



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