

Too-Long ‘The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies’ Delivers on Intimate, Hand-to-Hand Combat

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Though he’s never been called it before in scientific speak, I’m saying it now: *Peter Jackson is a master of mitosis*. He’s one of Hollywood’s best in splitting up the cinematic cellular DNA of one story into three because, apparently, he can’t do epics unless they’re in groups of three.

After directing a previous trio of *precious* ring-obsessed films one year apart, Jackson’s back with another threesome. “The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring” released in 2001, “The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers” in 2002 and “The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King” in 2003. Now we have his “The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey” in 2012, “The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug” in 2013 and the current “The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies,” which opened in theatres everywhere today.



Smaug is played by Benedict Cumberbatch in “The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies”.

Image credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

J.R.R. Tolkien’s book “*The Hobbit*” is only 320 pages long. Because of the success of the previous books and films, though, Tolkien thought it necessary to scribe another 125 pages of the little man’s backstory called “*The Appendices*”. That came in a later edition of the final “The

Lord of the Rings” novel “*The Return of the King*”.

Even if you add the backstory to the original book, that’s only 445 pages. And that’s still less than the whopping 513 minutes of big-budget Hollywood screen time allotted to Jackson’s three “The Hobbit” films once they survived the edit bay and hit the silver screen.

You know how much time and money can go into a single minute of Hollywood film, and if you include the backstory, that’s 1.15 minutes of screen time given to every much less costly paperback page. Is that generosity for the fans or Jackson’s obsession and inability to cut? It’s a mix of both.



A scene from “The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies”.

Image credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

This year’s “The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies” feels too long. Clocking in at 144 minutes, though, it’s actually the shortest of the three “The Hobbit” films and significantly so – by nearly 40 minutes. The previous two films hover right around the 3-hour mark with “The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey” in 2012 at 182 minutes and “The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug” in 2013 at 187 minutes. Comparing them to a famously long beloved film, “Schindler’s List” also exceeds 3 hours at 195 minutes.

“The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies” opens with a strong Smaug desolation sequence where the fabled black arrow comes to fruition. The David vs. Goliath moment feels rushed, though, and sets up the rest of the film’s primary battle in an almost disconnected manner. While it concludes with epic hand-to-hand combat, it’s the middle section of the film that drags within Middle-earth.

The final film in Jackson’s short-person-with-big-feet trilogy, the film is bringing to a conclusion “The Hobbit” trilogy with Bilbo Baggins, Thorin Oakenshield and the Company of Dwarves. Having reclaimed their homeland from Smaug, the pissed-off dragon now spews his fiery wrath upon the defenseless Lake-town.



Manu Bennett as Orc Azog in “The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies”.

Image credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

Obsessed with his reclaimed treasure much like Bilbo has a love affair with his ring, Thorin betrays all else to hoard his shiny keep in the Lonely Mountain. Everyone else wants in, though, both for the mountain’s mother lode and its strategic position. The evil Sauron beckons legions of Orcs to attack the mountain while the Dwarves, Elves and Men square off in a battle for the ages.

Once again, Jackson proves his mastery in building fantastically imaginative worlds and expressing sweeping epic imagery using an offensively large CGI budget.

The 2012 film had a \$250 million production budget (with a staggering \$1 billion global box office), the 2013 film had \$225 million of fun money (with \$958 million at the global box office) and now the 2014 film has a \$250 production budget already with a \$122 million opening overseas (a week ahead of its U.S. opening). That \$122 million opening is just from 37 international markets and only seven major ones, so we know the film will put up major numbers in the States.

But the reason this too-long 2014 film ultimately works isn’t because of the epic. Rather, it’s the intimate.



Orlando Bloom as Legolas in “The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies”.

Image credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

I know we can’t conceive of a Jackson franchise film around the 2-hour mark, but this movie has enough middle-film fluff that its 144 minutes could have easily been 120 (so long as none of its one-on-one scenes were touched). When Jackson focuses and zooms in, what we discover among just two characters in the same frame is often more powerful than the CGI duplication of thousands. The intimate scenes contain the true spirit of this beloved story and allow the film to entertainingly suck you into its high-octane violence.

For example, a slippery fight scene on ice between the enemy Azog (Manu Bennett) and Thorin (Richard Armitage) reminds us why our world loves these stories. The scene shows all the physical strength, mental acuity and emotional warfare an epic fight scene should without needing thousands of duplicated bodies to fill in a large open space.

The film’s tone is appropriately grim and dramatic – as it should be – and this is certainly no comedy. Martin Freeman as The Hobbit (currently Lester Nygaard in TV’s “Fargo” and Dr. John Watson in TV’s “Sherlock”) is indeed the central character who makes this film and the second trilogy the most enjoyable. But while Jackson is so supremely respectful of Tolkien’s short text, the film ultimately pays better homage to uber fans more so than franchise newcomers.

“The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies” stars Martin Freeman, Ian McKellen, Richard Armitage, Evangeline Lilly, Luke Evans, Cate Blanchett, Benedict Cumberbatch, Christopher Lee, Hugo Weaving, Orlando Bloom, Lee Pace, Billy Connolly, James Nesbitt, Ken Stott and Aidan Turner from director Peter Jackson and writers Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens based on the novel “The Hobbit” by J.R.R. Tolkien. The film has a running time of 144 minutes and opened on Dec. 17, 2014. It is rated “PG-13” for extended sequences of intense fantasy action violence and frightening images.



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