

The James Cameron Touch Creates ‘Alita: Battle Angel’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on February 14, 2019 - 11:15am

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The creation of new worlds has always been a mainstay of the cinema, virtually since it was invented. And whether you love or are indifferent to the films of James Cameron (“Titanic”), he remains one of the prime movers in advancing the creative tools of films. His influence is all over “Alita: Battle Angel.”

Cameron co-wrote the screenplay, based on a Japanese manga graphic novel, and the film used the advancing technology invented for Cameron’s “Avatar,” which re-creates human beings into digital characters that are partially based in reality and partially computer-generated art. “Alita” is wholly an innovation of this application, as the actress provides the voice and movements, but the character is a product of digital design. The result is entertaining eye candy, as the action sequences combine martial arts power with super heroics, as interpreted by veteran director Robert Rodriguez (“Sin City” series). Add the dash of Cameron’s philosophy for good and evil, familiar from his other films, and Alita has an earnest mythos that feels endearing.

A future world cyborg scientist named Ido (Christoph Waltz) is collecting spare parts in a junkyard in Iron City, when he comes upon a well preserved android face. The delicate brain turns out to be intact, and the scientist is able to rebuild the teen girl form, who he names Alita (Rosa Salazar), after his dead daughter. She has no idea of her past, but her revived circuitry provides indistinct memory.



Don't Cry for Me Iron City: Rosa Salazar is 'Alita: Battle Angel'

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

She takes up with a roustabout teenager named Hugo (Keanu Johnson), who introduces her to Motorball – a roller derby-esque death competition – and of his desire to someday reach Zalem, a utopian city in the sky. Alita also learns that Dr. Ido is a “hunter warrior,” part of a vigilante group protecting the city from cyborg assassins. As her memory increases, she realizes that she was a “battle angel,” and is the last of her kind. This is a game changer for her new world.

The James Cameron storyline of evil-for-evil's-sake is apparent in the screenplay, which adds that level of weird justification for Alita's battling ways. And while this is based on another work, the Cameron influence is fingerprinted all over the Hugo/Alita love story and the hope of reaching the Zalem utopia. This makes it easier to follow the complex story, but leaves no room for subtlety.

Besides the familiar stars, like the Oscar-nominated Mahershala Ali and Jennifer Connelly, who portray double agent conduits between Iron City and Zalem, the shiniest star in the film is the atmosphere of the compu-generated science fiction. It is absolutely seamless, as Cameron advances the cinematic possibilities he invented in films like “The Terminator” and “Avatar.” The character of Alita, with her “big eyes” and human/robot body combination, is like a comic book character come to life, but with a dash of extra inventiveness, and eye-popping in 3D.



The Cast of ‘Alita: Battle Angel’
Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

There is nothing inventive about the story, which feels like a comic book, but wasn’t doing anything new in deepening an emotional connection to the characters. They all exist eventually to do battle, and most of the film is a series of confrontations. As mentioned above, there is a love story of sorts between Hugo and Alita, and Cameron couldn’t help but give it a Jack-Rose-Titanic kick in its inevitable tragic circumstances. Eh, it’s made him a billionaire.

The is pure alternate action entertainment in the midst of the sticky environs of Valentine’s Day weekend. The gals can connect to the the emerging love beacon of Alita (and her ability to kick ass), and the dudes can get their comic book geek on, or vice-versa. That thin line in the Yin and the Yang doesn’t exist for nothing.

‘Alita: Battle Angel’ opens everywhere on February 14th, in 3D, IMAX, RPX and regular screenings. See local listings for type of screening format and show times. Featuring Christoph Waltz, Jennifer Connelly, Mahershala Ali, Rosa Salazar, Keanu Reeves and Jackie Earle Haley. Screenplay adapted by James Cameron and Laeta Kalogridis. Directed by Robert Rodriguez. Rated “PG-13”



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Source URL (retrieved on Apr 24 2024 - 10:44pm):

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