

‘Shazam!’ is a Paint by Numbers Superhero Movie

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The former Captain Marvel (story below) is now “Shazam!,” and has his own film in the DC Comics universe. Zachary Levi portrays the title character, now with a new origin to go along with his new name. Speaking of that, no new ground is broken in this pretty standard foster-kid-makes-good hero epic.

The title superhero began his life way back in 1939 with the fledgling Fawcett Comics, which wanted to take on Superman, born a year before. Captain Marvel was his name, and he converted from crippled newsboy Billy Batson with his magic word “Shazam!” (an acronym for the god powers of Solomon, Hercules, Atlas, Zeus, Achilles and Mercury). DC eventually bought the rights in 1972, and redid Captain Marvel as “Shazam,” making the new name permanent in 2011. This film uses the 2011 origin, that Batson is part of a foster family that also can change with the magic word. The origin and his first assignment is nicely balanced for a change, but the evil in the story isn’t as interesting as the beginnings. The overall film is fun, geared I believe more toward kids, but the story is flat and ordinary.

Billy Batson (Asher Angel) is a troubled foster kid, who can’t seem to land in a family that suits him, and he is obsessed with finding his real mother. He is placed in a new home that includes Freddy (Jack Dylan Grazer), a handicapped kid who is obsessed with superheroes. Billy defends Freddy in a bullying incident, which begins a strange trip for him.



Zachary Levi Has a Point in ‘Shazam!’

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

He gets into a subway in Philadelphia, which transports him into Rock of Eternity, and he meets the wizard named Shazam (Dijmon Hounsou). The wiz tells Billy to say his name, and it transforms him into a superhero (Zachary Levi). Batson is now inside the adult hero, and is freaking out. It will up to Freddy and the rest of his foster family to guide him through his new power.

Everything about the circumstances are adventurous and at times amusing, but Zachary Levi isn't that great at communicating the kid inside him, preferring jokes and panic. Essentially, like the film “Freaky Friday,” there is a child's personality inside an adult body. If the film could have focused on this phenomenon, it might have been a better ride. It was content to make it more of a joke, which took away from the adventure, and in turn the adventure took away from the gags.

The story does balance the origin of Shazam (and there is a good running gag on what to call the new hero, making fun of the Captain Marvel kerfuffle) with his first case, a face off with the evil Dr. Sivana (Mark Strong). Sivana is trying to harness the evil side, represented by the seven deadly sins, from the wizard Shazam. The sins are personified as weird lizard-like creatures, which seems to be the common look for evil with the nerds in computer design. Mark Strong is a bit over the top as Sivana, and not very interesting, but he is a okay contrast for the gee-whiz of the new minted hero.



The Hero Faces the Villain Sivana (Mark Strong) in ‘Shazam!’

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Like its villain, the story itself doesn’t have much virtue or life. It kind of like paint by numbers, adding the right colors in the right places. However, the results are fuzzy – like a finished paint-by-number copy – and wasn’t satisfying for me. Granted, I didn’t know the new origin base with Billy and the foster family (it is the canon in the comics now), and that didn’t help, but the character of Shazam has always been a favorite of mind, because of the boy within the man, and the film doesn’t deliver the warm fuzzies comic book lore nor any nostalgia.

Why does Marvel Comics now own the name “Captain Marvel”? Well, the wily Stan Lee saw that the name was available in 1967, and bought the rights to tweak DC Comics, forcing them to call their comic “Shazam!” when they revived the character in 1972. Who would have thought nearly 50 years later, the two characters from the one name would be competing in different multi-million dollar movies? Alice Through the Looking Glass has got nothing on the comic book/movie universe.

“Shazam!” opens everywhere on April 5th in 3D, RPX, IMAX and regular screenings. See local listings for format theaters and show times. Featuring J Zachary Levi, Asher Angel, Mark Strong, Jack Dylan Grazer and Djimon Hounsou. Screenplay by Henry Gayden. Directed by David F. Sandberg. Rated “PG”



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